



H-Environment

H-Environment Roundtable Reviews

Volume 6, No. 7 (2016)
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Publication date: September 20, 2016
Roundtable Review Editor:
Christopher F. Jones

Paul Sutter, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies: Providence Canyon and the Soils of the South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015). ISBN: 9780820334011

Contents

Photo Introduction	2
Introduction by Christopher F. Jones, Arizona State University	5
Comments by Jay Turner, Wellesley College	7
Comments by Conevery Bolton Valencius, Boston College	11
Comments by Claire Campbell, Bucknell University	18
Comments by Steven Stoll, Fordham University	24
Author's Response by Paul Sutter, University of Colorado, Boulder	27
About the Contributors	36

Copyright © 2016 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Environment, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online.



Images 2 & 3 by Arthur Rothstein; images 1, 4, 5, & 6 unattributed. All images courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Introduction by Christopher F. Jones, Arizona State University

Weird places are good to think with. And it is hard to imagine a weirder place than Providence Canyon. It is a site that needs to be seen to be understood, which is why I have taken a lead from **Paul Sutter's** book and opened this roundtable with a few images. As they show, Providence Canyon is a stunning location with vistas of deep canyons, exposed rock, and remarkable color contrast. Yet it is not millennia old like the Grand Canyon or the slow result of millions of years of geological forces. Instead, these beautiful gullies have been around less than two centuries. As we learn in ***Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies***, they are curious human creations. The gullies emerged as an unintended consequence of agricultural practices: chasms in the earth developed as valuable soil swept away. This beautiful place offers the potential to bask in a sublime landscape while also pondering humanity's destructive powers. A weird place indeed.

Providence Canyon is a remarkable blend of nature and culture. And it is little surprise that such an interesting analysis of a hybrid landscape comes from Sutter, who identified hybridity as the dominant theme of recent work in American environmental history in his 2013 state of the field essay.¹ Yet he also cautioned in that article that an extensive focus on hybridity ran the risk of undermining the moral arguments that have brought many to environmental history in the first place, leading to a confused morass of relativism and unsatisfying gestures toward complexity. How, his essay asked, can environmental historians recognize that all landscapes involve both humans and nature while still advocating for engagement with the natural world and environmental protection?

Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies can be read in one way as a meditation on this topic. Sutter makes no claim to offer definitive answers, but effectively utilizes this under-appreciated place to explore the science of soils, Southern agricultural practices, the efforts of Georgia boosters to gain recognition for the site, and the challenges involved in preserving and interpreting such locations for visitors. Based on the wide-ranging responses to this book by our reviewers, it is clear that he has succeeded in stimulating an engaging conversation on topics that will continue to occupy the attention of environmental historians for some time to come.

I asked **Jay Turner** to participate in this roundtable because of his expertise in the history of parks. Author of *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics since 1964* (Washington, 2012) and a recent state of the field essay on

¹ Paul Sutter, "The World with Us: the State of American Environmental History" *The Journal of American History* June (2013): 94-119. As he noted on p. 96: "If I had to tersely sum up the drift of American environmental historiography since 1990, I would say, simply, that all environments are hybrid."

national parks, his comments examine what Providence Canyon can tell us about landscapes of conservation and the ecology of erasure.²

Conevery Bolton Valencius shares an interest with Sutter for forgotten Southern landscapes along with using contemporary science to analyze environmental change in the past. Her most recent book, *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes* (Chicago, 2013), studied the historical and contemporary responses to massive earthquakes in the early 19th century along the Mississippi River. Among other topics, her comments usefully probe the methodological and writing challenges of convincing readers to pay attention to topics that can seem, on their surface, to be quite dull.

Claire Campbell brings her nuanced understanding of national parks and public history to the roundtable to explore how such places are interpreted for park visitors. Her current book project—*What Once Were You? Historic Landscapes in Canada*—seeks to integrate environmental history into historical sites, and she constructively opens a debate about how Sutter’s findings might be incorporated into the practices of agencies such as the National Parks Service. If we take the environmental history of Providence Canyon seriously, she asks, how should that be represented to visitors?

Steven Stoll completes our roundtable, lending his particular expertise in the history of soil science. Author of several books, including *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (Hill and Wang, 2002), his comments encourage Sutter to elaborate further on concepts of hybridity, the role of ideology, and the selection of the title.

Before turning to the first set of comments, I would like to pause here and thank all the roundtable participants for taking part. In addition, I would like to remind readers that as an open-access forum, *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* is available to scholars and non-scholars alike, around the world, free of charge. Please circulate.

² James Morton Turner, “Rethinking American Exceptionalism: Toward a Transnational History of National Parks, Wilderness, and Protected Areas” in Andrew Isenberg, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Comments by Jay Turner, Wellesley College

I have always been fascinated by the remnants of a small town named Lignite, located in southwestern Virginia. Lignite was once home to a small, but booming, iron industry and 300 men. Today, all that is left are the foundations of old buildings and a few sturdy brick chimneys, most overgrown with kudzu. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, workers mined iron ore from the mountain ridge, fired it in the furnaces in the valley below, and left cleared forests in between, where wood was harvested for charcoal. By the 1930s, the lands around Lignite, like much of the rest of the southern landscape, was worn after a century of intensive use. The federal government bought up the land and included it in the newly formed George Washington National Forest — one of the many landscapes of conservation that proliferated across the South in these decades. Today, it takes a practiced eye to read Lignite's past in the landscape: the grades of old rail lines have grown over, the second growth forest is tall and mature, and the iron furnaces along the creek bottoms seem like little more than historical curiosities. Forests have a way of hiding their history.

It is such places, many now landscapes of conservation, that Paul Sutter urges us to revisit in his book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies*. Such places can inform, to borrow his words, "a new age of conservation." Providence Canyon, the centerpiece of his analysis, offers a compelling focal point for such a project. If you have not already done so, take a few minutes to browse the internet for full-color pictures of Providence Canyon. It is a spectacularly anomalous landscape located in western Georgia, where rolling hills of farmland and forest give way to deep, multihued canyons reminiscent of South Dakota's Badlands or Utah's canyon country. In the 1920s and 1930s, Georgia boosters championed the area as a potential national park that exemplified a sublime natural landscape that would draw tourists and strengthen the region's economy. But to New Deal soil conservationists, who were keenly aware of the legacies of shifting agriculture in the South, Providence Canyon was not a sublime geological spectacle; instead, it was a product of a century of poor southern agricultural practices and intense soil erosion. Providence Canyon was protected as a state park in 1971, and the New Deal soil conservationists largely prevailed in their interpretation. Today, the state describes the park's canyons as "simply" the result of "of poor farming practices during the 1800s."³ Unlike many conservation areas, what makes Providence Canyon unique is the extent to which its unnaturalness is apparent and, even, celebrated. As a placard in the visitors center puts it, it stands as "spectacular testimony to man and his mistakes."⁴

Although unpacking that claim serves as the focal point of Sutter's book, the historical lessons that emerge for environmental history of the South and land

³ "Providence Canyon Outdoor Recreation Area," <http://gastateparks.org/ProvidenceCanyon>, accessed June 2, 2016.

⁴ As quoted in Paul Sutter, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies: Providence Canyon and the Soils of the South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 1.

conservation are much further reaching. The reach of this book is a product of Sutter's narrative approach. It is a book that begins not with local history or the natural origins of Providence Canyon, as you might expect. Instead, it begins with the regional and the social, and then gradually narrows its focus, only to fully probe the peculiarities and particulars of Providence Canyon in the final chapters. Thus, a book that is ostensibly about the origins of Providence Canyon, actually offers a rich analysis of southern agriculture practices, the injustices of southern slavery, the challenges of soil erosion, and how reformers and scientists responded to these challenges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (frequently in ways that exacerbated the problems) across the South. As Sutter reaffirms the central place of both soil and the New Deal in modern U.S. environmental history, he shows how Providence Canyon was, in many ways, a product of these broader forces. But that begs a question: Why then were the consequences of soil erosion at Providence Canyon so spectacularly disastrous? His answer is that we can not fully understand the extent of southern soil erosion regionally, or the case of Providence Canyon in particular, without wrestling with the specific qualities of southern soils. His argument is that "environmental factors may have been just as important as human ones in the South's extreme patterns of soil erosion."⁵ This book explains not only why that claim is important, but also why it is has been such a hard claim to advance in American history, which has resisted analysis that expands culpability for the injustices of the antebellum South from white southerners to include environmental factors, such as the physical properties of the soil itself.

That is one of the lessons that emerges from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies*. Another lesson is that as the South began to wrestle with the legacies of soil erosion in the 1920s and 1930s, especially during the New Deal, many of these degraded landscapes became landscapes of conservation. This is what got me thinking about the abandoned town of Lignite and the forests of Appalachia. As Sutter emphasizes, there is a significant overlap between southern landscapes of conservation — whether state parks like Providence Canyon, national forests like the George Washington or Tuskegee, or other parcels of protected land, like the Alcovy swamps — and longer histories of environmental degradation and recovery in the South. But the historical significance of that relationship is one that slowly disappeared in the twentieth century, not so much as a result of human activities, as the rapidity with which landscapes and forests recover a semblance of naturalness, especially in the South. In Sutter's words, *the ecology of erasure* is the "ways in which environmental forces have, with much human encouragement, obscured the South's history of human-induced erosion from view."⁶ Sutter provocatively titles the epilogue of the book "the ecology of erasure" and draws on the concept as he explores the environmental history of other landscapes of conservation across the South and the United States. I wonder what ambitions Sutter has for this concept. To what extent is it specific to landscapes of erosion, and to what extent is it about landscapes of succession, reforestation, or other modes of ecological recovery? Is it limited to

⁵ Sutter, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies*, 170.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

more temperate climates, such as the South, or does it also extend to places like the far north, where ecological processes transpire more slowly?

One of the examples Sutter offers to illustrate the implications of the ecology of erasure is that of the present-day Tuskegee National Forest. In the 1930s, the federal government purchased eroded lands as part of a New Deal project in partnership with the Tuskegee Institute to create the Tuskegee Planned Land Use Demonstration. The project relocated several hundred African American families as it assembled 10,358 acres of land that was to be restored through erosion control and reforestation with the eventual goal of supporting the region's African American farmers. The eventual creation of Tuskegee National Forest reflected the project's greater successes as a project in land restoration than social reform. Another example — which gets at the importance of the ecology of erasure to conservation politics — is that of the Alcovy swamps. In the 1970s, Georgia environmentalists succeeded in protecting the small river swamp as an “accessible wilderness experience” distinguished by its stand of old-growth tupelo gum trees.⁷ But careful analysis revealed that the prized swamps, despite harboring endemic species such as red buckeyes and mole salamanders, were most likely a product of nineteenth century sediment deposition resulting from upland agriculture and erosion. Sutter quotes the ecologist Eugene Odum on this point: “Those fertile wetlands are the result of our upland folly.”⁸ At these places, as at Providence Canyon, Sutter urges us to resist the ecology of erasure and re-read places like Tuskegee National Forest, the Alcovy swamps, and presumably Lignite, such that instead of separating nature from history, they instead bring them together.

Other historians have pointed us in similar directions, which brings me to several questions I'll raise for readers and for Sutter. These landscapes remind me of those that Marcus Hall explores in his book *Earth Repair*. To what extent are conservation landscapes like Tuskegee or Providence exercises in gardening, as opposed to naturalizing? In what ways are the New Deal's efforts to right the degraded lands of the South, such as those at Tuskegee, similar to those of the Italians, who “expanded restoration beyond land to include political and social well-being to the restoration enterprise”?⁹ What distinctions should an ecology of erasure make between the active processes of restoration, which more characterized Tuskegee National Forest's reforestation and erosion control programs, and the more passive processes of ecological change, which characterize the forests around Lignite in the George Washington National Forest? And reading about places like Alcovy swamps also reminds me of the Apostle Islands, where James Feldman has helped us to think carefully about the process of “rewilding.” As Feldman notes, the rewilding of the Apostles, which are a congressionally designated wilderness area with a long history of settlement, logging, and agriculture, presented dilemmas which the

⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁸ As quoted in *ibid.*, 191.

⁹ Marcus Hall, *Earth Repair: A Transatlantic History of Environmental Restoration* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 83.

National Park Service navigated by trying to draw clear boundaries between cultural resources, which were managed for their historical significance, and natural resources, which were managed for their ecological significance. Similarly to Sutter, Feldman urges us to recognize that history “deepens and enriches” that island’s wilderness.¹⁰ What is the relationship between an ecology of erasure and the processes of rewilding that Feldman illuminates?

Sutter holds up Providence Canyon as a “model for thinking about those places in ways that move us beyond the rigidity, and the easy ironies, of the nature-culture divide.”¹¹ In engaging in this thinking, however, a deep tension remains that is also important to Feldman’s analysis of rewilding— how do we manage the processes of ecological change, such as that they do not erase the past, and in so doing contribute to historical amnesia? Sutter puts the point clearly in the context of Providence Canyon: “How far ought we allow environmental forces to proceed in reclaiming a preserved Providence Canyon if the result will be a diminishment of its power as a site of historical interpretation?”¹² If Providence Canyon is going to help us move toward a “new age of conservation,” those become urgent questions. Is the challenge primarily an interpretive one — shedding light on the intertwining human and natural histories that underlie these places, even as the ecology of erasure slowly overtakes that past? Or, if we are to fully realize the goal of moving beyond the nature-culture divide, do such landscapes of conservation demand active management, such as removing trees, maintaining clearings, stabilizing gullies, to slow the ecology of erasure. As Sutter notes, we “need conservation criteria that deal with time and human influence in subtler and more satisfying ways.”¹³ I find that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies* offers powerful and helpful meditations on such questions, more so than specific prescriptions. And that leads to a final question for Sutter: How *should* the broader lessons of Providence Canyon inform conservation policy? What would he ask the state of Georgia Department of Nature Resources to do differently, and what broader recommendations might that suggest for places like the Malakoff Diggins State Historical Park, the Apostle Islands, or the historical ruins in places like the George Washington National Forest?

Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies is a compelling and thought-provoking book. It is an outstanding example of how a particular landscape can serve as a vehicle for far-reaching historical analysis. Although Providence Canyon may never join Yellowstone or the Great Smokies in the pantheon of national parks, as Sutter notes in his conclusion, he makes clear that it has just as much to teach us about how parks can serve as powerful sites of interpretation for understanding U.S. and environmental history.

¹⁰ James Feldman, *Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 223.

¹¹ Sutter, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 193.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 192.

Comments by Conevery Bolton Valencius, Boston College

Paul Sutter grounds his most recent book in two seemingly contradictory challenges. First, he sets out to show us how an extraordinary landscape came to be — and why most of us know nothing about it. Here, as sometimes happens, words fail. The book itself opens with a dramatic frontispiece: black and white photos shot during the Great Depression. This is an excellent choice on the part of author and publisher: the extraordinary vistas of the Providence Canyon landscape are central to the movement of the book. Beautiful but haunting images show cascades of white and grey that form canyon walls. Like stalactites, they are fascinating for how they capture movement in stillness. The sides of the gullies appear as sails caught just at the moment of billowing out in a gusty wind.

Layers of shading — compelling even in black and white greytone — indicate different levels: most of the walls have a dark layer on top and then brighten as they go down. Striations groove walls of the curved gorges, giving the photographs the kind of texture that makes you want to look at them a long time.

But it's the scale that is perhaps most stunning: as anybody knows who's ever built a sand castle or a played in mud, you can make a canyon wall at many scales. Up top of most of these photos, usually slightly less in focus than the closer billows of the gully edges, are bits of the image that take a minute to sink in. Trees — those are trees! This thing is *BIG!* Toy-looking trees stand along the tops of ridges, while full-grown trees grow dwarfed in some of the gully bottoms. This is not only a visually striking but substantial place.

Reading this book along a small creek, I almost fell out of my chair and into the water. Wow!!! I nudged my family alongside me: "Look at this!" My spouse, who suffers through far too much fascinating-to-me minutia of the nineteenth century to be easily impressed, at first looked over with a vaguely longsuffering air, and then reached for the book with genuine interest. "This is in Georgia!" I explained. "Georgia!" "Mmmmm...." he replied, studying the photos and giving the spine an appraising "maybe-I'll-read-that-one" look only rarely warranted by my historical library. Visually, Paul Sutter's hook worked. Our family has driven across and visited many parts of the American South—how could we not know anything about such a gorgeously crazy landscape?

Here is where Paul Sutter's second mission clicks in. In order to accomplish that first purpose of explaining the dramatic gorges of Providence Canyon, Sutter sets out to engage us readers with the history of American soil science. The challenge here is best illustrated by what would have happened if I'd nudged my family to say "Hey, look y'all – I'm reading about soil science!" (I get quite enough adolescent eye-rolling as is, thank you very much.)

Boring matters. Anything that seems too deadly boring just doesn't get looked at. I'd venture to say that in U.S. historiography the science of soils occupies a lonely place alongside topics such as banking regulation and Medicaid reform: areas that do in fact shape our entire culture, but that possess such a daunting bureaucratic and archaic nature that only few hardy analysts — usually not historians — attempt to take them on.¹⁴ (I once read a food policy expert explain that deep in Capitol Hill there are a couple of famed Congressional staffers who really and truly understand the Farm Bill, that massive every-five-years legislation that drives more of our national economy than most anything else except perhaps defense spending and federal health programs: these few wonky souls are apparently revered for actually having read it and understand it in all its parts, unlike anybody else who modifies, votes on, or lives with this bill.)

The study of what makes good soil might warrant a good comedy skit about the topic least likely to get you a second date or a scintillating conversation at most parties (rural areas excepted — I'll come back to that). Surely, someone somewhere has to pay attention to such things — but do we really need to hear about them?

In my crankiest moments, I'd say that the sense that soil science must be among the most boring topics known to historians is yet another piece of evidence that we are all going to hell in a handbasket. Soil science is of course vital, in the original sense of related to life: without food grown in good soil we cannot exist.

A few Americans — those less-than-two-percent who make part of a living from farming — probably need no convincing here. Gardeners too understand the complexity and at times fragility of good growing earth. If we all stop to think about it, we all probably would. But we don't stop to think, because really, why should we?

Here's where Paul Sutter uses the dramatic landscape so well: this, he argues, is one place that shows us why we need to stop and think. Why, in the eastern ranges of Georgia's rolling mid-section, in Jimmy Carter Georgia, do we see canyons so dramatic that they look like something out of a mid-century spaghetti Western? Because, he argues, of the science of soil.

It is in bringing these two halves of his paradoxical mission together that Paul Sutter's books shines, showing us not only more about a fascinating place — worthy in itself — but about how this place stands for others, more ordinary or easily overlooked.

¹⁴ Yes, there are wonderful salutary exceptions of historians who have actually ventured forth into soil science! — and I talk about how I'd love to teach their books a bit later. They are, though, a brave few: by contrast, what seems like a new bookshelf's worth of Civil War books comes out every year.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies is in large measure a perceptual history. We follow the changing perceptions of this dramatic landscape through time, catching glimpses of how people saw it through fragments of newspaper, mentions in guidebooks, the framing of governmental reports, even in poems. After introducing us to some of the basic “where” of the place, Paul Sutter narrates how early geological surveys spread across the U.S. in the early nineteenth century: science in the service of agriculture, mineral development, and American land claims. Part of Sutter’s argument first unfolds here. Geology, he argues, was deeply agricultural in the early nineteenth century: scientific study of soil types was after all not a separate pursuit from the study of the earth, but central to it. Indeed, by mid-century many of the subsurface resources sought by geologists in early America were not only precious metals but fertilizers and fertile soils.¹⁵ Part One of this tripartite structure is about soil erosion as a scientific problem, and how it was seen or not seen by changing generations of scientists in the service of both government and commerce.

In Part Two, Sutter shows the hope and the impact of 1930s “highway progressives,” locals who in the era of car tourism began to seize upon striking landscape as a potential money-maker. Not just Sunday picnics, perhaps, but entrance fees? Seeing the success of western boosters, local leaders near Providence Canyon pushed for national park status for their “Little Grand Canyon.” (It did become a state park, but only in the early 1970s, and is now downgraded to “state outdoor recreation area” out of budgetary constraints). These somewhat hokey efforts form part of a history of small-scale and rural environmental activism in the early twentieth century that is too little noted. It’s easy (I admit guiltily) when teaching an environmental history survey class to pay homage to Yosemite and Yellowstone and then breeze on into the challenges of teeming cities, arid western drought, and World War II, not paying attention to what else was happening in rural areas that were less spectacular or simply less successful at getting noticed. Yet much that was interesting was happening, including efforts to market Providence Canyon as a site of environmental marvel, and as warning.

Frustrating many local boosters, when they did get Providence Canyon noticed, it was not as appealing local attraction, but as fearsome moral lesson in environmental degradation. Here, Providence Canyon registered not as puzzle or attraction, but as stark problem. The emerging and increasingly powerful soil science bureaucracy of the New Deal — part of an agricultural science increasingly hived off from geology professionally and in practice — seized upon Providence Canyon as a stunning example of human harm to good American farmland. Sutter traces the fascinating debates over soil erosion within US governmental bureaucracy, contrasting the

¹⁵ I was struck by this point in Sutter’s book in part because David Spanagal addresses this in “Science in Early America: Print Culture and the Sciences of Territoriality,” co-written by David I. Spanagal, Emily Pawley, Sara Sidstone Gronim, Paul Lucier, and me, *Journal of the Early Republic*, 36, no 1. (Spring 2016): 73-123.

essential optimism of arguments that even heavily-used soils will remain robust with the grim insistence that profligate use and un-careful agriculture would squander the precious national resource of American soil.

Only after we are committed to the story of how a particular place could become seen in so many different ways — only after showing us the human story — does Sutter turn in Part Three to the actual soil science as we currently understand it, to the topographic and geological factors that we think constitute Providence Canyon as a physical as well as perceptual environment. It's a nice move: by that point, we readers are committed and interested and willing to plough through mineral composition to understand what (we think) is really going on.

This chapter on soil science shows our contemporary misunderstanding in our histories of "soil exhaustion." Sutter argues convincingly that for geologic reasons, soils of the American South were by and large not that fertile to begin with — and that managing soil fertility is a complicated task. Not wasty ways but stratigraphy may explain the breath-taking spectacle of the water-shaped landforms in Providence Canyon. Because of the ebb and flow of ancient seas, much of the subsurface is composed of highly erodible unconsolidated sand, under a visibly darker cap. Farmers in that region were not particularly different from those in many other places. Providence Canyon, for all its startling visual qualities, is not unique, but representative.

Throughout, Sutter guides us with occasional first-person comments. He opens the book as a traveler and historian seeing places with his family, and then reappears as guide as the book unfolds. The conversational tone and pace is engaging and works well. Sutter's first chapters are short, with succinct summaries — like the opening photos, excellent strategies for keeping readers in a book that is essentially about the composition of soil. At the same time, I found the title itself surprisingly unsatisfying for such a distinctive place and such a well-written history, and I worry that because this lovely book covers so many topics it will be hard to pigeonhole and put on a bookstore shelf or a class syllabus.

Yet I could imagine using this book in my own teaching and learning. If I could somehow shoehorn a seminar's worth of students through the door, they could learn a tremendous amount about U.S. history and the history of science in a course on the history of soil, with work by excellent colleagues Steven Stoll (*Larding the Lean Earth*, 2002), Brian Donahue (*The Great Meadow*, 2005), Ben Cohen (*Notes from the Ground*, 2011), David Spanagel (*Geology and Power in Early New York*, 2014), and Emily Pawley (forthcoming book on agricultural science) as well as others, and maybe some history of mineralogy and farming thrown in.

Land and labor are both central themes of this book. Sutter offers a thoughtful discussion of the complicated and hard-to-discern relationship of slavery to soil erosion, both practically and politically. In contrast, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies* serves as a searing indictment of the direct causal connections between

sharecropping and soil erosion. Providence Canyon is not, in the end, providential: it is a direct result, in Sutter's argument, of the human artifice that pegged agriculture to tenant farming and institutionalized debt peonage in an era of increasingly industrialized farm technology and fertilizer input.

This book addresses the history of science, though doesn't seem to fully want to acknowledge doing so. Nowhere does author or jacket copy refer to the book as a history of science, though it does provide a history of a great deal of scientific work and thinking. This is one place I wanted to ask the author some questions. Paul: how did you decide to use such a light touch with respect to the history of science as an analytic approach? Do you see places where your argument might have been different if you'd cast the book as, say, a history of agricultural sciences as well as an environmental history?

This interest is in part because of my appreciation for how Sutter does use present-day scientific knowledge. The geek in me rejoiced to find toward the end of the book a formula for soil erosion. Sutter uses this to show how a main historical argument of his — that many diverse factors shaped the soil history of the South — is buttressed by the analysis of other disciplines as well. I appreciated that this came at the end, as friendly confirmation, rather than as warrant at the beginning. It sparked more questions: Paul, I found your narrative use of science as partner with historical evidence rather than as gatekeeper and boss to be effective! Could you have helped your readers see behind the curtain a bit more to why or how you made the choices to employ contemporary scientific fields as you do?

The history of medicine, by contrast, is not kept at the doorstep but invited right in: Sutter shows how soil erosion is related to malaria (chapter 5) and to widespread malnutrition among tenant farmers (chapter 6). I appreciated this thoughtful interweaving, and I hope that the book is recognized as part of the larger history of environment and health in the U.S. South. Sadly, it may not be. Subspecialties are so separated, and time pressures so intense, that it may take an analytic leap of faith for many historians of medicine to decide to spend time with this book. A question both for this author and for all of us: I wonder what we could do as a profession to encourage the cross-pollination of books — at conferences or simply in conversations, and crucially in our own reading — when one or two chapters cross over beautifully into an adjoining disciplinary subfield?

As an environmental history, the book does satisfy. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies* has a delightful amount to say about the many sometime surprising aspects of the "decline of the plantation landscape" (154). Fertilizers, range laws, the boll weevil, and Texas tick fever are all part of the story of how southern farmers were able to use land and also so often watched it gully away. I was moved by the poetry of one black Georgian of the early twentieth century, who used Providence Canyon as Paul Sutter would later, to see larger patterns of loss, hope, beauty, and betrayal.

A joy of any good book is seeing the familiar new. I have been fascinated with southern kudzu since car trips as a child. I appreciated the role of that terrifyingly effective plant in soil conservation much better after conversation with this book. I appreciated too Sutter's emphasis on how soil conservation maps used color to highlight vivid threat (87). So, too, in my work do hazard planners use a bright red bulls-eye of earthquake hazard.¹⁶ Color choices tend to be little noted by most of us wordy historians, but they are often an important element of argument in the sources we study.

The book ends with reflections on other landscapes of degradation and puzzle. I appreciated the interesting and well-told examples of other places. I thought, too — following my own interests — that I would have been interested to hear more meta-level reflection about how or even why to uncover landscapes whose histories are hidden or lost. Paul, at present your analysis is evocative but more suggestive than definite: in future work, might you push a bit more to help us readers see how history is shaped by which places are overgrown?

Here too I thought of my students as well as my own work. I could picture a “lost spaces” syllabus with essays in the collection *Agnotology* by Robert Proctor and Londa Schibinger, Joy Parr's *Sensing Changes*, my own *Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes* and the fabulous (in all senses) memoir novel *Let Us Build Us A City: Eleven Lost Towns*, by my fellow Arkansan Donald Harington. Perhaps it could instead be a “places and knowledge denied” course that would include Civil War monuments, Erik Conway & Naomi Oreskes' *Merchants of Doubt*, recent work on sites of energy and weapons production, and most everything produced by sturdy second-wave feminism. Paul, are these the projects you'd imagine your book being read alongside? Or are you trying to make a different set of interventions in how we understand U.S. Southern history?

The epilogue also centers around Sutter's chief claim in the introduction: that irony is insufficient. Here's where I'd make my main critique: perhaps I'm generationally ill-equipped or just plain too cranky to find irony sufficient for much of anything. I was easily convinced that irony could never adequately encompass a full, complicated, hot, growing, eroding, real place, because I don't think irony ever can describe any place. Instead, I would have rather had Sutter put the paradox of dramatic vistas and seemingly boring science front and center.

¹⁶ In spring 2016, the US Geological Survey released an earthquake hazard map including newly-analyzed risk of induced earthquakes. The bright shading of formerly blandly-colored areas of Oklahoma and Kansas is inspiring both scientific argument and political argument at present. Search for the terms “USGS 2016 seismic forecast” or go to: <http://earthquake.usgs.gov/hazards/induced/images/ProbDamageEQ.pdf>

Paul, you're so good at talking with us readers, at drawing us in: did you consider how it might work to frankly acknowledge the challenge of writing the seemingly dusty history of soil sciences? Do you think you could have brought us readers along as accomplices in your besting of historical boredom? Or are you perhaps satisfied with narrative choices that led to a book with 208 pages of text, rather than a door-stopper?

My perspective here is fundamentally one of sympathy: the subject of eroded soil is a hard sell, no matter how dramatic the pictures. In this, Paul Sutter's project is like much of what many of us explore and try to explain, and I'd like good histories to reach a wide range of readers, expert or not, who prefer gunfire or blood-sport politics or something with a bit more sexy than sandy, erodible soil. As I read it, Sutter's aim in this history of Georgia's Providence Canyon is to show the pulsing vitality of soil science and soil erosion. He hits true. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies* shows us how coming to appreciate a vista of sublime and mysterious grandeur may require understanding the history of each simple particle of fast-eroding soil.

Comments by Claire Campbell, Bucknell University

For some time now, environmental historians have seen parks – be they national, state, or provincial – as the work of human hands rather than islands of wilderness. So too, for that matter, have archaeologists, other park staff, First Nations, and others. Borders drawn for political expediency rather than ecological integrity; landscaped for automobiles rather than wildlife; monuments to contemporary cultural priorities more than timeless natural formations. But these ways of seeing parks have not really unsettled the iconographic status of parks as places of superior natural and national worth, in either Canada or the United States.

I confess I have to been Georgia only once, and did not visit Stewart County or its formerly famous canyon. So Paul Sutter's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies* taught me a lot about the terrestrial and human contours of this part of the south, and its geological, racial, and agroeconomic character. But it also got me thinking about other national parks, far removed from Stewart County.

The status of *national* park, of course, carries significant currency. It denotes exclusivity, rarity, and a collective value that elevates certain places out of the crass realm of “private, commercialized roadside natural wonders” and into a select “pantheon of tourist sites” (71). (My parents always preferred national parks to KOAs or other private campgrounds – they were more rustic, more educational, formally sanctioned by National History, and for all of this, more virtuous for family camping.)

Although both the Canadian and American parks services talk about their “family” of national parks or historic sites, we rarely think of these places in such associational ways. Yosemite and Jasper are meant to be exceptional, not representative or comparative. Can you imagine a Not-Quite Haida Gwaii, a Reminiscent-Of Redwood? So even though local promoters of Providence Canyon insisted theirs was a little Grand Canyon, it's unlikely we'd see a national park called a “little” anything. (I've just learned that Pennsylvania has its own [Grand Canyon](#), in the [Tioga State Forest](#); and yes, borrowing the name feels more derivative than elevating.)

We have assembled a cabinet of geographical curiosities, a collection of the unusual (I'm tempted to extend the family metaphor here, but for the sake of diplomacy and self-preservation, probably should not.) Yet so much southern and American environmental history tracked across and through Providence Canyon. What does it mean to celebrate the one-of, but not designate the more typical, more prevalent, the historically more influential?

Sutter doesn't go into depth as to why Providence Canyon never became a national park, but presumably it had something to do with the fact that the Grand Canyon was already the unsurpassed placeholder for “grand landscapes of erosion” (34). The concept of “the geological sublime” (60) got me thinking: when and where does

science influence our notions of beauty? Are there other places canonized thanks to scientifically-informed aesthetics? Such sublimity was “awful and beautiful,” and thus to many, rather confusing (101).

From the nineteenth century there had been similar ambivalence regarding its origin – of natural or human design – and thus its true meaning. Providence Canyon thus became an object of national scrutiny but not veneration. Sutter presents the 1930s as a key point in the story: when these two perspectives diverged in the, uh, gully. The Great Depression and automobile tourism inspired a boosterish promotion by those who felt that their Georgia version was either *providential* or at the very least a natural wonder. But New Deal conservationists and soil scientists wrote voluminously about erosion and gullying as scars of fault and blame, a topographical scolding of destructive southern agricultural practices that needed to be corrected and repaired.

And that ambivalence, ultimately, is why Providence Canyon is not a national park. Certainly both Parks Canada and the National Park Service address human history in national parks, and have done so explicitly in a framework of “cultural landscapes” for a generation. But it is generally a very particular kind of human history that we see – the kind of use that most closely resembles ours today. The Banff town site or the South Rim of the Grand Canyon both discuss a century and more of tourism, such that visitors today might realize that they tread in footsteps of millions of others. But that upon which the tourists are to gaze – the natural wonders of the Rockies and the Colorado River – could not, unlike Providence Canyon, be explained as even partly the result of human intervention or human failing.

As Sutter points out, we’re accustomed to thinking of national parks as places that protect examples of natural processes, that “[keep] the works of humanity at bay” (102). But should they? Shouldn’t the retreat of the Columbia Icefield between Banff and Jasper be seen as a condemnation of fossil fuel emissions and global warming? Shouldn’t the diminished flow of the Colorado through drought-stricken California have us rethinking a century of unsustainable water consumption in the southwest?

What *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies* makes clear is that neither the processes of park creation, nor park interpretation, *nor* their scholarly critics, have gotten to that point. We may acknowledge parks as nature framed for human consumption, but are not yet ready to consider them as natures in recovery from other kinds of human uses. Sutter points out that almost all of the parks and forests of the South “have histories of human land use hidden beneath their mantle of trees” (194). These are recovered agricultural lands, abandoned from private ownership and failed farming, reclaimed by the state, and regreened by nature.

This, this is what parks agencies in North America need to talk about. Across the continent resource communities are asking, “What do we do now?” What do we do now that the timber is logged, the coal is mined? How can parkland – and a new kind of parkland, one that features historical awareness rather than ahistorical facades –

serve to rehabilitate and reuse exhausted industrial lands? This section of Sutter's book reminded me of the current controversy over the proposed Maine Woods National Park: a remarkable expanse of forest, riverine headwaters, and wildlife habitat in a state with a collapsed timber industry, closed mills, and no real plan B (which in turns reminded me of Nova Scotia ...). Ironically, environmental histories are the stumbling block. Local residents fear land-use by federal fiat, without acknowledging their own histories in the area. At the same time, we are unaccustomed to parks *with* such histories. Can we accept such second-generation parks as part of a human history with nature – which may include a rebuke of our unsustainable, exploitative practices – rather than escapes into a nature somehow protected from us?

This is a dilemma for the publically minded environmental historian. How can we make complex, multiscalar, narratives of environmental history part of the interpretation and experience of parks or historic sites? Because, for the most part, they haven't been. Archaeologists grapple with sea surges washing away the outlands of Fortress Louisbourg; biologists study the effect of climate change on mountain flora. But these are discussions among (eroded) professional staffs, primarily in scientific terms, and rarely placed in public view, in historical context, or most ambitiously, in conversation with public policy.

Sutter suggests Providence Canyon could be a new kind of park, "one that honestly contends with the legacies, sometimes spectacular, of human land use on this continent" (109). As he notes, this ranges from types of clearance and road construction to the global capitalism that rewarded export monocultures of certain crops. He also points out that agricultural landscapes deserve more attention, having faded from the environmentalist spotlight as North America became suburban (107). Agricultural conservation was a prominent concern in the antebellum period. Patrick Henry declared, "he is the greatest Patriot, who stops the most gullies" (21) as early republicans elevated prosperous, sustainable agriculture into civic virtue; farmers experimented with numerous conservation measures, like terracing, or "horizontal plowing," a favourite of Henry's contemporary Thomas Jefferson (e.g. 124-127). Sutter tracks down the enduring appeal of the southern practice of "shifting cultivation": a wasteful use of land and brutal economy of slave labour, yes, but also a strategic response to economic downturns and the fundamental limitations of southern soils. What can we learn from these experiments in conservation?

Still, there are two, very big problems with reimagining a park along these lines. Sutter addresses one of them. It turns out that Providence Canyon is itself kind of exceptional, the result of southern agriculture's "peculiar regional pathologies" (177), certainly, but atop a very localized combination of specific geological layers that proved particularly vulnerable to erosion. Gullies happened in "areas primed for such erosion" (179). Which means that we are talking scales of space *and* time, nature *and* history. Sutter's vision of this is worth quoting in its entirety:

Providence Canyon State Park ought to be more than an ironic curiosity. It should be a place to meditate on the profound history of human-induced soil erosion in the American South and its diverse causes and effects across the landscape gradients of that region. More than that, it needs to speak to all of the ways in which human motivations and decisions shaped that history, both within and beyond the South. It ought to be a monument to the settler society that produced it and to the market forces that drove those settlers. It ought to be a memorial to the farming practices and strategies that depleted the soils of the South and to the brutal and degrading systems of slavery and tenancy that undeniably contributed to soil erosion across the region. Providence Canyon ... sits in a region with no shortage of environmental sins to be washed away. *But it also needs to do more.* It needs to communicate that conservation cures were sometimes as destructive as the maladies they were designed to alleviate. It needs to raise tough questions about the morally satisfying linkages we have drawn between the exploitation of land and labor. And it needs to embody the extraregional forces that motivated southerners to work the land the way that they did ... (Emphasis added)

And even after that enormous list of “realms of human agency,” he adds, “that is not all it embodies” (157).

Here I am torn. I greatly admire his ambitious, big-picture thinking. I absolutely *love* the idea of a park/historic site hybrid that teaches such concepts of environmental history. (Hey, I’m writing a whole book about this.) We have nothing like this, nothing that approaches this. And Providence Canyon might be a good candidate for a new genre of park. Instead of restyling an iconic site, perhaps it would be easier to reinvent a forgotten one.

But *how*? That single paragraph is a thumbnail of Sutter’s entire book, and doesn’t even encompass his final arguments. We can begin to untangle these issues over several months in seminars in environmental history, in the protected space of a university classroom. But public historians have struggled for decades with how to communicate complex, sensitive, and unfolding scholarship. Consider the limitations of audience, of access, of media, of resources. This is not to suggest for a moment that it cannot be done, but it will be difficult. I am genuinely curious to know *how* he thinks such a remodeling could take place, in what form, and by whom. The National Park Service, the state of Georgia, the ASEH?

Good environmental history is about specific places caught in larger patterns; theory made three-dimensional. I hope Sutter will take it as a compliment that towards the end of the book I found myself thinking about places far removed from southern soils: the Atlantic shorelines of Canada’s Maritime provinces.

First, I thought of the north shore of Prince Edward Island, calving into the Gulf of the St. Lawrence, the famous red soils washed by storm surges amid rising sea levels. This, too, is a place with its traditions tilled into farmlands and pastures. And indeed, Parks Canada once proposed a second national park on the Island: a cultural landscape park that would consist primarily of farmscapes. While for a host of reasons it never happened, that question – how to present landscape as human habitat, how to designate and interpret working natures – continues to elude us.

But I really admire Sutter's motivating impulse, and his sense of himself relative to the region of Providence Canyon. A few months ago I gave a talk criticizing Canada's transprovincial dependence on fossil fuels, but admitted that I felt conflicted over making such criticism. After all, I have contributed to – and benefitted from – the petrostate wealth as much as most. (I felt this again watching the devastating wildfires near and through Fort McMurray in the spring of 2016. The tar sands are short-sighted, as is a sprawling city in a boreal forest – but neither I nor anyone in my family have ever had to work the rigs to pay off debts and it seems cruel to make such comments from the safety of my office.) As an environmental historian I often struggle with the ethics (and efficacy) of weighing in more forcibly, caught between an academic's caution (and perhaps a Canadian conservatism?) and the knowledge that these issues are too important not to say something. "But," someone in the audience asked, "*isn't* this your intervention?" In other words: *isn't* this your job?

Despite a self-deprecating reference to his work as "environmental carpetbagging" (xvii) – which surely almost all of us, in almost all environmental fields, do at some point! – Sutter shows great empathy toward southern farmers while still standing firm in judgment of racist and destructive practices. His tone – generally sympathetic, but not romantic; scholarly, but not detached; historical, but not determined – reminded me a bit of Graeme Wynn's long view of Atlantic Canada:

that we got to where we are today not as pawns moved across the checkerboard of centuries by some invisible, inevitable force or "tendency," not because we were, collectively, a tribe of thoughtless ecological hooligans, and not because we did not care, but because people persisted, acting in pursuit of complex, ever-shifting individual and collective human hopes refracted through oft-rearranged prisms of economic, legal, political, social, scientific and technological ideas and structures. What kept our predecessors going through all of this was, at least in part, a faith that they could act to sustain their families and communities and shape their futures.

... it encourages understanding of, and sympathy for, the struggles and foibles of others, acceptance of one's own and other's failings, and a fair dose of humility as we compare the circumstances in which earlier lives were lived with those in which we enjoy our own.¹⁷

¹⁷ Graeme Wynn, "Epilogue: Reflections on the Environmental History of Atlantic Canada," *Land and*

Such wisdom seems appropriate for so many of the landscapes that need healing around us.

Sea: Environmental History in Atlantic Canada, eds. Claire Campbell and Robert Summerby-Murray (Acadiensis Press, 2013) 254-255. Edward Macdonald's essay in the same collection – "A Landscape . . . with Figures: Tourism and Environment on Prince Edward Island" – discusses the failed second park in the context of Island tourism and park history. I thank him for the reference.

Comments by Steven Stoll, Fordham University

We tend to see farms and fields as a fixed or permanent form of land use and hunter-gatherers as wandering around, never staying long in one place. But this is an illusion. The opposite is true. Hunters remain in the same regions for generations, even centuries, shifting only slightly within them. Colonial gambits for territory, stunning rates of reproduction, and the formation and consolidation of nation-states against aboriginal claims have contributed to a diaspora of famers since the seventeenth century. As anthropologist Hugh Brody puts it in *The Other Side of Eden*, agriculture “depends upon, and gives rise to, the most pervasive form of nomadism. The urge to settle and a readiness to move are not antagonists in the sociology of our era.”¹⁸ Nothing represents this frantic movement like the destruction of the ecological base. Agriculture depletes its necessary store of nutrients, and if these are not replenished, farmers need to leave. Severe erosion is the most spectacular form of this depletion, the draining away of the very essence of subsistence and the social order.

Paul Sutter’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies* gives us an American story of severe erosion by considering one extraordinary and vexing landscape: Providence Canyon, Georgia. The narrative moves beyond the strangeness of the place and its origins to contemplate how erosion entered science and policy during the period when the canyon formed and came to public attention. Sutter weaves his larger historical account through the story of the place, consistently depicting the canyon as both a human artifact and a representative of a certain environment, yet this is what is vexing about the book.

At play is the apparent dialectic between Nature and Culture, with Providence Canyon representing both to different people and at the same time. Sutter is right to do away with the passé irony of the odd and beautiful tourist attraction that owes its existence to erosion. But if the point is that we cannot pick these two categories apart, that no place on Earth lies outside of either, then they form a false dialectic. Then why keep writing about them?

I can only be suggestive here. The subject has received great attention, most notably from the anthropologist Bruno Latour. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour argues that modernity depends on the purity of these categories. Yet by insisting on this division, fusions or hybrids composed of the effects of technology on various environments multiply. For most of human history, these hybrids occupied a central position in ritual and religion. Examples include rain gods, bison dances, the fifty-year Sabbatical cycle of the Israelites, and spring fertility rites. Acknowledging the unintended consequences of human subsistence did not always bring about real palliation, but it did make explicit the degree to which human needs and ecological cycles could disrupt each other. “To undertake hybridization,” writes Latour, “it is

¹⁸ Hugh Brody, *The Other Side of Eden: Hunters, Farmers, and the Shaping of the World* (New York: North Point Press/FSG, 2000), 84.

always necessary to believe that it has no serious consequences for the constitutional order.”¹⁹ The purity of categories might be an illusion, but the ideology of modernism has real consequences, like climate change, species extinction, and giant gullies.

Sutter might have speculated about Providence Canyon as just such a hybrid, both in the circumstances of its creation and in the thinking about the environment that it spawned? When promoters called it a natural wonder, they attempted to erase its human history, furthering the illusion. Yet in a larger sense, seeing the canyon as a hybrid would have allowed Sutter to move past the false duality.

Ideology does not figure in Sutter’s interpretation, but it might have deepened his narrative. I have in mind the conflict between Milton Whitney and Cyril Hopkins, two soil scientists whose divergent views at the turn of the century appear to have used soil as a vehicle for other ideas. Whitney’s inexplicable commitment to empirically flawed notions of indefinite fertility reveals inarguable commitments about the benign effects of humans on the larger environment. He denied, explicitly, that agriculture had ecological or social consequences.

A critical reading of Hopkins’s novel, *The Story of the Soil* (1911), would have opened the narrative to a full-blown theory of racial nationalism. This is a romantic notion traceable to nineteenth-century Germany. The myth of “blood and soil” created an organic pan-nationalism and linked it to a particular territory. The Nazis used it to justify the invasion of the Sudetenland.

Hopkins believed that a reinvigorated southern environment would eliminate racial conflict by securing the white power over the dangerous freedom of blacks. In *The Story of the Soil* (which I did not read thoroughly for this review), the protagonist Percy Johnson participates in a number of violent conflicts with African Americans in the midst of decaying plantations. He learns from a former planter that blacks brought up in slavery were docile and trustworthy. Percy then accepts the task of restoring the worn-out soils of a former plantation, with all the scientific detail from his own research. The connection is obvious. A restored soil would reinvigorate the civilizing mission of white landowners. They would shape a black race in the image of white domination, repudiating for all time the northern perversion of racial order represented by Reconstruction. The novel offers a fictional and scientific antecedent to *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), a series of essays by twelve southern writers arguing that a return to (a largely imagined) agriculture would restore the South to dignity and cultural influence. My point is simply that Whitney and Hopkins used soil science to spin out distinct ideological fantasies.

What about Providence Canyon itself? Aside from the occasion it offers for a discussion of soil science, what is it? The strength of Sutter’s book is that it lifts the

¹⁹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 41.

canyon out of its antiquarian context. But the reader also gets the sense that the canyon is more accident than artifact. It seems to say more about its exceptional geology than it does about agriculture. Clearly, the county in which the canyon lies is poorly adapted to plowing. Anyone who opened up the ground would have caused it to give way. The lore that an Indian trail set off a chain reaction that resulted in this unparalleled gully makes this point. But Sutter keeps our eye on the larger point that what people in the past thought about Providence Canyon and the role it served as meditative object for soil science and policy is of greater importance than the gully itself.

Sutter's title bothers me a little. Agee and Evans created a stunning rebuke to social science. Their book attempted a radical subjectivity that also functioned as first-rate ethnography. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* promotes poetry over statistics, and where social workers visited sharecroppers looking for signs of malnutrition and the "degeneracy" that supposedly came from rural isolation, Agee and Evans found dignity in lamplight and Sunday dresses, a struggle against socially constructed poverty, and a desire for something better. Sutter's title evokes the South, I suppose, and perhaps the Great Depression. It suggests praise for a something misunderstood, the way that Agee praised un-famous people. But it borrows too much.

But I want to be clear about the many strengths and many insights of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies*. It's a bright and lucid book that collects an important debate on the environment. It traces a time during which soil was discovered as a scientific problem and a social crisis, and it upholds one place in particular as emblematic of that debate. Perhaps most of all, it presents a teachable moment in lucid prose. Providence Canyon cannot be understood as an attraction or a "sickening void" or a particular soil phase. It is all of them, as well as a shadow landscape of a reckless American regard for land.

Response by Paul Sutter, University of Colorado, Boulder

I want to begin by thanking Christopher Jones, the editor of these H-Environment Roundtables, for featuring *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies*, and the reviewers who gave my book such careful readings, who engaged with it creatively and threw intriguing questions my way. I will try to address some of their questions and critiques, though an appropriate response to their commentaries would involve writing a longer essay than anyone would want to read.

First, a brief history of the project. I initially came across Providence Canyon by accident and, intrigued by the place, I decided to write an essay about its ironies. What I discovered when I started doing historical research was more interesting than I could have imagined: a place that almost no one has heard of today was all over the place in the historical. I have never had a more satisfying research experience as I did searching for historical traces of this now anonymous place. No small part of what I wanted to accomplish in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies* was to bring this once famous spectacle back into view, and to muse on how and why we have forgotten it. I was particularly fascinated by the New Deal impulse to use the Providence Canyon as a visual exemplar of a larger regional story, though I became convinced, despite my sympathies with the New Dealers' critical reading of American environmental history, that their use of Providence Canyon was not entirely accurate. And so I wrote a conference paper that eventually turned into an article in the *Journal of Southern History*.²⁰ The project might have ended there – and maybe should have – but for the encouragement of several people to render this story as a *short* book, a process that I mistakenly thought I could accomplish quickly and easily. The book version also sprang from my desire to have a say in the rapidly developing field of southern environmental history. During more than a decade at the University of Virginia and University of Georgia, I dabbled in southern environment history – editing a book series and co-editing a reader on the subject, working with superb graduate students in southern environmental history, and collaborating on an environmental memoir on longleaf pine management – but I felt the need to write my own manifesto and thought Providence Canyon could bear the weight of that larger agenda. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies* was thus born as an ode to a region whose fascinating environmental history hijacked my research life.

I initially thought that the book would just be an inflated version of the article, but that's not the way it turned out, at least not entirely. Much of the book remains true to the article and comes as an expanded discussion of the themes explored therein – particularly the sections that examine the 1930s contest over Providence Canyon and whether it was a natural wonder or southern blunder (Part II), and my own particular interpretation of how we ought to interpret this place today in its larger southern context (Part III). But two other sections, which the reviewers seem to have disproportionately focused on, were new to the book: Part I, which looks at

²⁰ Paul S. Sutter, "What Gullies Mean: Georgia's 'Little Grand Canyon' and Southern Environmental History," *Journal of Southern History* 76, 3 (August 2010): 579-616.

how developments in geology and soil science helped to make Providence Canyon a meaningful place by the 1930s, and the substantial Epilogue, a long meditation on Providence Canyon's meaning as a southern landscape of conservation. I had not expected to spend so much time writing about soil science and scientists, but the story grabbed me (against all odds) and I felt the need to tell it, though for the specific purpose of explaining how and why Providence Canyon came to mean what it did when it did. And while I knew I wanted to end with a meditation on soil erosion and landscapes of conservation, that part of the book also took on a life of its own. The result is a book that is indulgently peripatetic. The reviewers have, I think, reacted to that approach, both in its strengths and its weaknesses.

Two of the reviewers, Jay Turner and Claire Campbell, have focused heavily on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies* as a park and conservation history, and I am pleased that the book made both of them think about analogous places: in Jay's case, Lignite, Virginia, a former center of the early American iron industry now ensconced within the George Washington National Forest, and in Claire's case the Atlantic shorelines of Maritime Canada. I absolutely do take that as a compliment. Their choices to focus on the parks and conservation aspects of my book are not surprising, as both have made their scholarly reputations as historians of North American parks and wilderness systems. Both point usefully to places where I might have said more about what I was trying to do with Providence Canyon.

Jay's review raises a series of questions that I cannot do justice to in a short response, except to say that they are all important, I am glad the book raised these questions for him, and I will need to think about some of them more deeply. To a great extent, my invocation of "the ecology of erasure" was meant to be specific to the former tobacco and cotton South, where the postwar return of the forest has been complex and multivalent, and where reforestation often involved replacing one form of plantation production with another. Certainly places such New England, the Northeast more broadly, and the upper Midwest have similar histories of reforestation and those processes too have slowly overwritten past histories of human land use. But in the American South there was a particular kind of forgetting going on as it has related to the return of forests to the region. Although the practiced eye certainly can find all sorts of evidence of past erosion in the former plantation South, and I hope my book will encourage southerners and visitors to the region to train their eyes on the landscape for such signs, I also sensed that the environmental history of plantation agriculture, and particularly its effects on southern soils, has been neglected in part because of how the landscape level changes to the region after World War II obscured the evidence. As importantly, I wanted to use "the ecology of erasure" to point to the ways in which mundane conservation areas today not only obscure the histories of past land use but also of innovative conservation interventions with fascinating social components. In a region where the return of the forest has only sometimes come as restoration or rewilding, I was looking for a concept that offered a bit more of a neutral stance on ecological changes that others have too facily celebrated as the "greening of the South." Finally, the areas I gesture at were not merely conservation areas that had

histories of human land use within them; more than that, as Jay recognizes, these conservation areas corresponded with some of the places where the land was *most* abused. Or, in a case like the Alcovy Conservation Center's gum swamp, they were places whose considerable ecological virtues were partly artifacts of past erosion. So, in that sense, I do see some differences between, say, the stone walls that wind their way through so many now-mature New England forests, and the deeply gullied southern fields that have grown up in old-field pines. I do not want to overstate those differences, but certainly my sense of the "ecology of erasure" was born in the specifics of this southern context of the forest's return to former plantation regions.

Having said that, though, I am glad that Jay raised the work of people such as Marcus Hall and Jim Feldman, and concepts such as restoration and rewilding. He could have also mentioned, and I might have done more to cite, work by scholars such as Ellen Stroud, Sara Gregg, David Foster, or the many others who have focused to one degree or another on similar processes of forest regeneration in places where human agriculture and other land uses once reigned.²¹ I share Jim Feldman's belief that recognizing and honoring the historical dimensions of conservation landscapes adds to the richness of their environmental protection. Indeed, I might push that insight one step further to suggest that the challenge of preserving both landscapes of regeneration and the historical artifacts within them is best conceptualized not as a competition between natural and historic preservation, but as parallel forms of historic preservation. Every inch of this earth is the product of historical change over time, and there is no nature that exists outside of history. If my book has any overarching conservation intervention, it is that we should think beyond notions of pre-historical nature, recognize that whenever we intervene in landscapes to protect them we are making historical choices, and even use apparently natural areas – or decidedly unnatural but nonetheless conventionally park-like areas – to teach historical lessons.

That last point leads me to Jay's final challenge: to think through my quick end-of-book reference to how Providence Canyon and "the ecology of erasure" might help us to navigate a "new age of conservation." Jay points to the tension that remains between historic preservation and the ecological processes that threaten it. More specifically, he asks whether I see the challenge primarily as one of interpretation – of keeping past land uses and their impacts at the center of interpretations even as environmental processes erase their presence in the landscape – or whether I have

²¹ James Feldman; *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011); William Cronon, "The Riddle of the Apostle Islands," *Orion* (May/June 2013); Marcus Hall, *Earth Repair: A Transatlantic History of Environmental Restoration* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005); Sara Gregg, *Managing the Mountains: Land Use Planning, the New Deal, and the Creation of a Federal Landscape in Appalachia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); and Ellen Stroud, *Nature Next Door: Cities and Trees in the American Northeast* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012); David Foster, *New England Forests through Time: Insights from the Harvard Forest Dioramas*. I am also a big fan of Tom Wessels' work, and particularly *Reading the Forested Landscape: A Natural History of New England* (Woodstock, Vt.: Countryman's Press, 1997).

something more managerial in mind. To answer narrowly, I offer Providence Canyon as a new kind of park that is less about setting aside a natural area than preserving and interpreting a spectacular artifact of human-environmental interaction. Here, the challenge is primarily interpretive, and Part II of the book is my effort to offer such an interpretation. But I could also see Providence Canyon being actively managed, gardened even, to contain the ecology of erasure and keep the spectacle of erosion front and center. But Providence Canyon is a specific kind of park in my imagining, and approaches to both interpretation and management would likely vary across the spectrum of conservation designations and areas. Somewhere like Feldman's Apostle Islands, where rewilding is at the core of why the area has become a valuable conservation area in the first place and where wilderness designation defines the tension between natural and historic preservation in specific ways, might be managed quite differently from, say, a Civil War battlefield, where history is the primary preservation purpose but where natural processes must still be confronted. I think there are ways of honoring and incorporating history into how we interpret all of our landscapes of conservation, but there is no one formula for doing so. Providence Canyon is an extreme example on a spectrum of such sites, more like a Civil War battlefield than the Apostle Islands, and I do not want to impose a single formula on how we would interpret or conserve such places. In a sense, I am content to offer "powerful and helpful meditations on such questions, more so than specific prescriptions," to use Jay's words. Mostly I wanted to press beyond the important revisionist argument that preserved areas that we long thought of as "islands of wilderness" are in fact "the work of human hands" (to quote Claire), and to point out that, if we move beyond this ironies of a nature before history, we might do more to protect parts of the landscape as parks that provide us with potent environmental history lessons, even as we are protecting the important non-human qualities of these places as well.

Claire Campbell begins her review on this very point, and appropriately so. Claire then asks a question that I wish I had asked in her way: "Can we accept such second-generation parks as part of a human history with nature – which may include a rebuke of our unsustainable, exploitative practices – rather than escapes into a nature somehow protected from us?" If the answer is yes, the question becomes, where should we make these second-generation parks, and what will be our criteria for setting aside such places? Claire's next question is equally important – how do we get the public to appreciate, and even participate in, "the complex, multiscalar narratives of environmental history" that the interpretation of such places require? In a sense, Claire takes Jay's conservation questions and reframes them as a problem of effective public history. I am not sure I have great answers, except perhaps to try to expose the public to really whacky places like Providence Canyon and then see if we can convert shock value and superficial irony into subtler environmental history appreciation.

Claire raised two other points that struck chords with me. The first was her question about what it means to celebrate and protect one-of-a-kind spectacles but not the more mundane, prevalent, and historically influential landscapes. My entire analysis

of Providence Canyon pivots on a variation of that question, and yet even as I try to pull the more typical and prevalent into my interpretation of Providence Canyon as a place of anthropogenic erosion, my argument for making it a new kind of park still falls back on its spectacular nature. Its sui generis qualities are still my hook. Claire also points out that both Parks Canada and the U.S. National Park Service “address human history in national parks,” an important point and one worth emphasizing. More than that, and in the midst of the centennial celebration of the U.S. National Park Service (which comes a full five years after Parks Canada celebrated its centennial), I have been increasingly impressed (as have many other commentators) by a fact about the Park Service that has been hiding in plain site: the majority, perhaps the vast majority, of the sites that it protects and interprets are historical sites. The natural wonders may still be the “lodestones,” as Stephen Mather called them a century ago, but the historic sites are more numerous and increasingly important, and they make the National Park Service arguably the most important public history organization in the United States – even if the NPS is still doing a lot of that public history on a shoestring. Once we see the National Park Service as fundamentally steeped in history, perhaps we might take a bit more hope into the public history problem that Claire sensibly raises.²²

The other two reviewers spend less time on my culminating meditations on conservation and more on the soil science dimensions of the book. I was particularly happy that Steven Stoll was one of the reviewers, as his *Larding the Lean Earth* was an inspiration. Anyone who has read his book and then mine will recognize that, in the places where we cover the same territory, I have mostly followed a path that he helped to blaze. But while I appreciated his concluding compliments, I found his major thoughts and critiques harder to make sense of. His first suggestion, following a nice explication of Latourian hybridity, is that I might have treated Providence Canyon as just such a hybrid. I thought that was what I was doing, if not quite in a fully Latourian sense. Certainly that was my intent, so I wonder whether Steve misread what I was trying to accomplish. Or perhaps I have misread his critique here? Steve’s second major point is that ideology does not figure in my interpretation. I am not sure that is right, though certainly my analysis is not ideologically driven. Steve chooses a narrow example to make that point – a debate between Milton Whitney and Cyril Hopkins over soil fertility as it played out in the writings of each. I do not disagree with the quick reading he gives of the ideological dimensions of this debate, though he seems quicker to jump to sweeping ideological conclusions than I would have been. I do not disagree that “Whitney and Hopkins used soil science to spin out distinct ideological fantasies,” but, at that point in my analysis, I was less interested in those fantasies (or the varieties of other fantasies that other soil scientists and soil conservationists spun out) than in the questions of soil science that related to my argument about the rise of soil conservation. Later in

²² Denise Meringolo’s recent book helped me to appreciate this. See her *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012). The Organization of American Historians has also produced an important, and less hopeful, recent report, [Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service](#) (2011).

the book, though, I do make clear that we need to see the erosion that Providence Canyon came to represent as at least in part the result of both racist and capitalist ideologies. If this book has any quiet heroes, they may well be Arthur Raper, an agrarian reformer whose ideological interpretation of “Gullies and What They Mean” was central to my own, and Thomas Jefferson Flanagan, the African American poet who offered a reading of Providence Canyon that was at once conventional and transgressive.²³

Steve may be on surer ground when he critiques me for, in a sense, ignoring Providence Canyon itself. I am not sure I would agree with the language he uses here. For instance, I decidedly would not characterize the canyon as “more accident than artifact.” But as I zoom in on the canyon itself and its specific causes, I am decidedly trying to complicate narratives that particular land use practices and ideologies are *sufficient* to explain Providence Canyon, even though I absolutely see these forces as central to explaining what caused Providence Canyon. But Steve is right that I could have done more to work up a detailed portrait of local agriculture and said more about the social, rather than the environmental, forces that made the gully itself. But again, at that point in the book, my major point was not to explain that humans caused the gully, which they clearly did. It was, rather, to explain that if we are to make sense of *why Providence Canyon was such an extreme example of human-induced gullying in the South*, the specific environmental dimensions are perhaps more important than the larger social and cultural dimensions. That does not mean that it was an accident, but it does mean that it was not merely an artifact of human land use practices and political economies. In the end, the gully itself functions in a particular way in my narrative, as a counter to those who would, not understanding its specific history, use it to advance particular ideological critiques. Perhaps that is why Steve sees me as both neglecting ideology and the gully itself.

Then there is my title. I share Conevery Bolton Valencius’s concern that my title may be too opaque and not a sufficient advertisement for the book in its full scope, though I struggled to find one that was able to do that work. And there are certainly ways in which what I am doing here and what Evans and Agee did in their work do not match up. In re-reading my own justification for the title, I realize I may have been too apologetic about how my intentions were different from those of Agee and Evans, feeling shy about appearing to claim for my project anything approaching what they achieved. But I thought I was pretty clear that there were several reasons for choosing this title. First, I wanted to play with the tension inherent in the title between fame and anonymity, partly to invoke the lesson that there is much to be learned by focusing on the big lessons that emerge from small anonymous places and partly to invoke my claim that Providence Canyon once had been a famous gully and that it deserved to be such again. Second, I wanted to invoke Evans’ and Agee’s searing critique not just of social science but, more importantly, of documentary journalism and the ways in which that genre made portraits of the particular stand for the general and universal. Just as portraying them, in words and images, as

²³ Arthur Raper, “Gullies and What They Mean,” *Social Forces* 16 (1937): 201-207.

exemplars of rural poverty did violence to the three families in Hale County, Alabama that Agee and Evans focused their book on, so it seemed to me dishonest to use a place such as Providence Canyon, with its very particular natural and human history, to textually and visually represent a larger and very real environmental problem. Certainly my book is not a study in radical subjectivity of the sort that Agee engaged in, but it is an attempt to treat the local and the particular with dignity and care. That explanation may not satisfy Steve, or others, but it's the best I have got.

Conevery Bolton Valencius's comments were characteristically smart, enthusiastic, and curious, and they were welcome precisely because – as her review makes clear – she too is an enthusiast for strange and lost landscapes. I particularly appreciate her sense that I have at least partially overcome the challenges of writing about such a dry subject as soils. One of the banes of living with this project has been trying to quickly describe it to friends and colleagues and even strangers. Picture glazed eyes. Conevery focuses on the centrality of soil science to my story, both in how I discuss the history of soil science and its relation to soil conservation and then in how I use it to spin out my own interpretation of Providence Canyon as a southern landscape of erosion. One of her most important questions is why I did not self-consciously engage with the history of science and what the book might have looked like if I did. As I already mentioned, my foray into soil science was unexpected, a classic case of thinking you would write a paragraph or two about a topic and then finding it threatening to take over the whole project. I had to constantly rein in that section, in part because I could not tell whether it would be interesting or merely digressive and in part because I did not want to stray too far into a history of science that would have move off my particular focus. From a history of science standpoint, I think there are several important aspects about my discussion in Part I that I probably could have done more with. First, there is the curious case of Milton Whitney, a critical institution builder in the field of U.S. soil science whose ideas about soil fertility and exhaustion were wrong. I never quite figured out how Whitney managed to maintain control of the federal soils bureaucracy for more than three decades, or even fully fathomed the scientific reasoning behind his misapprehension (riddles that a good historian of science would have pursued more doggedly), but here is surely a fascinating case of the interrelationship between scientific ideas and ideology, scientific practices, and institution building. Second, I did become fascinated with the U.S. Soil Survey as a form of field science, and while it's not a topic to which I could do justice, I do hope other historians of science some day will. Third, the history of the rise of American soil conservation, which has too often been overdetermined by the Dust Bowl, is incomprehensible without carefully attending to early American soil science. Modern erosion consciousness emerged as a problem of soil classification; the ideal of permanent agriculture, so often ascribed to New Deal reformers and that was later reinvented as organic agriculture, emerged out of debates among soil scientists over soil fertility; and I am convinced, though I am not sure I have quite proven, that Hugh Hammond Bennett's emergence as a major national figure in the soil conservation movement in the late 1920s had a lot to do with Milton Whitney's death and the downfall of the Whitney orthodoxy. Moreover, the scenic case for Providence Canyon was itself a byproduct of how

geology and soil science diverged. In the end, though, I dealt with the history of soil science in this first section mostly to explain how and why a modern discourse on soil erosion and the need for soil conservation emerged when it did, how and why others came to see Providence Canyon as scenic, and how these developments in turn helped make Providence Canyon a briefly famous place. That was my purpose. Because I wanted to keep the book short (even shorter than it turned out to be) and focused, I had to resist a fuller engagement with these and other history of science points, which certainly occurred to me but which would have made this a much bigger book. Another thing worth saying about my treatment of the history of soil science is that I pivot away from it at a key moment in its development. I resisted saying much about the American soil scientist Curtis Marbut, or the growing influence of Russian soil science, or the important transformations in soil science and classification across the rest of the century. I am acutely aware that I merely dipped my toes in a much deeper pool here. Finally, and to be perfectly honest, doing justice to the history of American soil science would have required a lot more archival research. So my light touch was decidedly intentional and hard-won, and while I absolutely agree that a history of science-focused analysis would be worthwhile, I can only hope my book inspires others to pursue it.

Conevery also asks me to say a word about my resort to current science in my interpretation of soils and larger environmental forces in Part III, which I am glad she found satisfying. I do not give my use of contemporary science there the kind of critical analysis that I give to the early history of soil science in Part I. Rather, in a fairly typical environmental historian kind of way, I utilize the insights of soil scientists to try to reconceptualize some of our understandings of the received wisdom on the relationship between soils and southern agricultural history (work already done to a degree by other scholars). I certainly could have problematized such an approach to contemporary science, something I have done more explicitly in other writing, but for narrative purposes I chose to avoid doing so.²⁴ What I did do was to read selectively in the soil science literature, and, as importantly, to talk with soil scientists and hydrologists about how I might apply science to historical explanation. But in making a case that we need to pay attention to soils themselves, I might have done more to make it clear that doing so also requires paying attention to the people that pay attention to soils.

A few other quick thoughts on Conevery's generous review. She gives me some credit for engaging with the history of medicine, which might be a bit too generous. My analysis certainly does intersect with the history of medicine a couple of times, and perhaps most intriguingly in speculation that there was a relationship between upland erosion, lowland swamping, and malaria in the South – that soil erosion, in other words, might have made southerners sick. But that's really just a paragraph, not enough to engage all but the most adventuresome historians of medicine.

²⁴ See my article, "Nature's Agents or Agents of Empire? Entomological Workers and Environmental Change during the Construction of the Panama Canal," *Isis* 98 (December 2007): 724-754.

Conevery also asks me to meditate on the meta-history of lost and overgrown landscapes, and how history is shaped by which landscapes get overgrown. It's a great question that I'm going to leave hanging, since this response is getting long. But her recent book on the New Madrid earthquakes is a wonderful case study of what is to be learned from attending to such places. Finally, Conevery's primary critique has to do with my use of irony as a framing device. While I can certainly see her admittedly cranky point, I would only counter that, in the case of Providence Canyon, most people have had a hard time getting past the irony of the place, and that that is itself indicative of continuing patterns of thought, if not among environmental historians then certainly among a public interested in environmental issues. Steve asked, why keep writing about the false nature-culture dialectic that undergirds this irony? The simple answer, it seems to me, is that it remains incredibly potent in the minds of many, and that Providence Canyon offered an off-kilter way of exposing its limitations without resorting to a too-facile notion of hybridity.

Let me finish by thanking the reviewers again. The great virtues of this format are that it encourages probing and creative questioning rather than bland summary and critique, and that it allows author and reviewers to engage in meaningful conversation. I hope that this is just the beginning of many conversations, with these reviewers and with others, about the issues raised by *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies*. We cannot hope for much more from our books than that they start conversations.

About the Contributors

Claire Campbell is an associate professor in History at Bucknell University. Recent work includes editing *A Century of Parks Canada, 1911-2011* and *Land and Sea: Environmental History in Atlantic Canada*. She is now completing a new manuscript, titled *What Once Were You? Historic Landscapes in Canada*, that argues for environmental history at historic sites.

Christopher F. Jones, Assistant Professor in the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies, studies the histories of energy, environment, and technology. He is the author of *Routes of Power: Energy and Modern America* (Harvard, 2014) and is currently working on a project examining the relationships between economic theories of growth and the depletion of non-renewable natural resources.

Steven Stoll is Professor of History at Fordham University. He is finishing a manuscript on agrarian economy and capitalism in Appalachia.

Paul Sutter is a Professor of History at the University of Colorado, Boulder and the series editor of Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books, published by the University of Washington Press. He is currently a fellow at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment & Society in Munich.

Jay Turner is an associate professor in the environmental studies program at Wellesley College. He is the author of *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics since 1964* (University of Washington Press, 2012). He is currently at work on a book on the environmental history of lead-acid batteries, energy, and the future of sustainability.

Conevery Bolton Valencius is Professor of History at Boston College and the author of two books: *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (Basic Books, 2002), and *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes* (University of Chicago Press, 2013). Her current project is a history of fracking and induced earthquakes.

Copyright © 2016 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Environment, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online.