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# The "Oldest River" As An Appalachian Popular Region

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## ABSTRACT

Appalachia's New River was labeled "the second oldest river in the world" during the 1970s as part of a campaign to save the river from being dammed. Despite the absence of geomorphic evidence, the promotion of the superlative age of the river was so successful that the mythical label became reality in the minds of the region's populace. The "oldest river" thus became a popular or vernacular region, defined as one perceived to exist by its inhabitants. Sources of evidence for the current existence of the oldest river as a popular region include Internet references, which typically use the positive place image of the ancient stream to enhance the value of the river valley's attributes. Geography educators and students at all levels will benefit from class research projects aimed at identifying and understanding popular regions found near their educational institutions.

**Keywords:** *Appalachia, popular region, New River, oldest river, Internet*

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## INTRODUCTION

A popular or vernacular region is one that is "perceived to exist by its inhabitants" (Jordan and Rowntree 1990). Popular regions exist at a variety of scales, and a large popular region will likely contain smaller popular regions within it. Works published during the last few decades have delineated popular regions for the United States and within certain states (Good 1981; Hale 1984; Jordan 1978; Lamme III and Oldakowski 1982; Raitz and Ulack 1981; Reed 1976; Shortridge 1980, 1985; Zdorkowski and Carney 1985; Zelinsky 1980). Examples of popular regions include the Middle West, Appalachia, the South, Dixie, the Upper East Side of New York City, and the High Country of North Carolina. Many of the country's popular regions have existed for long periods whereas others are quite youthful. New names or labels for regions are often promoted by local and regional organizations which are trying "to create new, positive place images" in an effort to enhance tourism development and lure new business and industry to an area (Morgan and Brinkman 1995, 55). The emergence of positive place images may also lead to the development of a sense of regional pride among a place's inhabitants. It is not, however, an easy task to create a new popular region, and most such promotions are probably unsuccessful.

The selection and successful promotion of a name for a popular region will often lead to the decline in use of an existing name of a region. For example, the designation "Northeast Tennessee" was recently promoted to take the place of the longstanding regional label, "Upper East Tennessee" (Morgan and Brinkman 1995). A state regional tourism agency led the charge for changing the regional label because, according to agency personnel, "Upper East Tennessee" was confusing to potential tourists outside the region, and those outsiders had a better understanding of the location of "Northeast Tennessee." It seems ironic that such a change was promoted, because many tourist activities in the region focus on the history or heritage of the region, and Upper East Tennessee had served as a regional label since at least as early as the 1840s.

Sometimes superlatives are used to promote place. Such a superlative was employed to promote Appalachia's New River, which is said to be the "second oldest river in the world," and "the oldest river in the Western Hemisphere," as well as in North America and the United States. People within and outside the New River valley have not only accepted the notion of the antiquity of the river but have embraced the idea to such an extent that the "oldest river" valley has emerged as a popular region. The fact that the popular region has emerged during the last twenty-five years allows us to better understand how the region developed. In this paper we account for the creation of the "oldest river" and its emergence as a popular region, and show how the Internet is now being used to promote the idea of a superlative age for the New River.

## THE NEW RIVER

From its headwaters in the mountains of North Carolina, the New River flows north and northwestward some 340 miles through the Appalachians to its terminus at Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, where it joins the Gauley River to form the Kanawha, a tributary of the Ohio River (Fig. 1). Originally named

the Woods River after an early explorer of the area, the stream designation had mysteriously shifted to the New River by 1750 (Morgan and Mayfield 1994). In flowing over North Carolina and Virginia, the New passes through two physiographic provinces, the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Ridge and Valley, while in West Virginia, the river traverses a section of the Allegheny Plateau.

Geomorphologists (landform scientists) have commented on the antiquity of the New River since at least the late nineteenth century (Mayfield and Morgan 1996). William Morris Davis was the most influential physical geographer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his seminal work on Appalachian drainage patterns and geomorphic history, he argued that the modern pattern of drainage observed in the region was the result of what was originally consequent drainage, but erosion of the original mountain range and renewed uplift allowed the streams draining across the grain of the mountains to become antecedent (Davis 1889).<sup>1</sup> In addition, Davis noted that all the streams from the Roanoke northward drain from northwest to southeast and all streams south of the Roanoke drain from southeast to the northwest. He therefore argued that all streams south of the Roanoke maintained their original courses, while those to the north had reversed themselves. Davis made no specific mention of the New River, but clearly implied that all streams south of the Roanoke maintained ancient courses (Davis 1889).

Subsequent to Davis' original work on Appalachian drainage, numerous other geomorphologists have attempted to explain the curious situation wherein streams flow directly against the grain of topography. Those researchers became more specific in their references to the antiquity of the New River; however, no geomorphologist has claimed in any reputable publication that it is the oldest in North America (Morgan and Mayfield 1995). Willis (1895, 181), for example, referred to the New as having "an apparently peculiar course."

The most recent research on stream patterns relative to rock structure incorporates modern plate tectonic theory as well as analyses of mountain ranges that remain tectonically active, such as the Himalaya. Oberlander (1985) concluded that transverse drainage does not always result from antecedent drainage, so rivers like the New are not necessarily more ancient than the orogeny that produced the mountains through which they cut.<sup>2</sup> More recently still, geomorphologist Victor Baker has noted that interest in the age of rivers comes primarily from chambers of commerce rather than scientists because "I guess it sounds sexy to say that your town has the oldest river" (Wetzler 2004).

A century of scholarly references to the age of the New did not bring it much attention, even within the river valley. The New's status, however, changed permanently in the 1970s, when it emerged as a mecca for whitewater enthusiasts, and, more prominently, the stream received publicity from a grassroots effort to prevent the North

Carolina and Virginia sections from being dammed for the creation of an American Electric Power reservoir.

### CREATION OF THE OLDEST RIVER

Efforts to prevent construction of dams on the New River in northwestern North Carolina appeared futile at the beginning of the 1970s, despite protests from a concerned local populace, environmental groups, and certain elected legislators. A bill to prohibit dam construction was defeated handily in the U. S. House of Representatives in 1972. In related congressional hearings the river was described as being in one of the oldest valleys on earth. Perhaps as a desperate measure, opponents of damming the New River began in 1973 to describe the river as the oldest river in North America and the second-oldest in the world, behind the Nile.<sup>3</sup> Hundreds of press releases were sent to newspapers across the country by organizations such as the National Committee for the New River, resulting in the publication of numerous articles containing statements about the antiquity of the New. In essence, the message put forth was that it would be unconscionable to dam and create a huge lake on the second-oldest river in the world. The strategy had a great impact on the public and on Congress, with legislation to block dam construction being narrowly defeated in 1974. Continuation of the media campaign to save the river resulted in a last-minute victory for the New in 1976, when a 26.6 mile section in North Carolina was declared a Wild and Scenic River. That designation prohibited the obstruction of the natural flow of water on the river (Morgan and Mayfield 1994).

It seems clear that the pronouncement of the New River as the second-oldest river (behind the Nile) was simply part of a political strategy to save the river from being dammed. The connection of the New to the Nile appears to give authenticity to the claim. It did not matter that it was impossible to prove that the Nile was the oldest river or that the New was the second-oldest river in the world or even the oldest in the United States. The advertising technique of "repetition of message" was so effective that near-truth became reality. The campaign to save the New thus produced greater than expected results: The river was saved and at the same time transformed from being simply an old river to being the second-oldest river in the world, a river of mythic proportion. The notion of a superlative age for the New had become nearly pervasive by 1976 (Morgan and Mayfield 1994).

### EMERGENCE OF THE SECOND-OLDEST RIVER AS A POPULAR REGION

Place image and place representation for Appalachia and its parts are often negative. It should not be surprising, then, that the idea of a superlative age for the New River was more than well received. Residents of the region have embraced the "oldest river" myth to such an extent that we could characterize it as a part of the region's "pride" or "imagination." That regional pride was illustrated to us by one of our students who related a story about his

family's arrival into the New River Valley of Virginia. While moving into the new residence, the student's father, a Methodist minister, was greeted and welcomed to the community by a neighbor, who stated: "Reverend, there are only two things that you need to know about this community as background for your work. The high school football team still runs the single-wing offense and our New River is the second oldest river in the world."

Additional evidence of the strong identification of the region's populace with the "oldest river" comes from comments made in a speech by a North Carolina university professor and environmentalist who lives along the stream (Smith 2004):

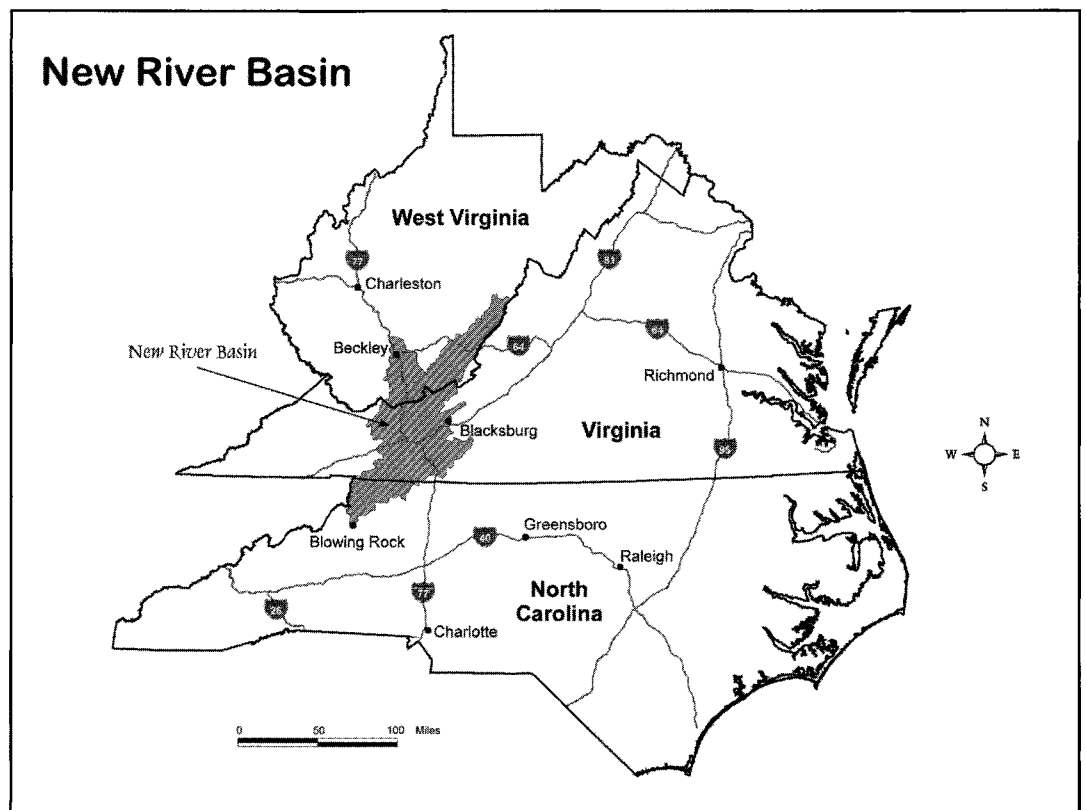
Every day I drive home from the University... At night in this gap sometimes I stop and get out of the truck...Before I climb back in the truck I sometimes breathe deeply. It is a breath of the headwaters of the oldest river in the nation, the continent, this side of the world. I head home, past the familiar homesteads and darkened houses of my neighbors and friends. I love this place and I am thankful for the conservation efforts.

After 1976, writers describing almost anything in or about the New River Valley mentioned the antiquity of the stream, and agencies within the watershed took advantage of the positive place image of the "oldest river" to help promote their areas and products (Morgan and Mayfield 1994). In addition to being a positive place image, the "oldest river" was a characteristic unique to the region, and localities and economic development and tourism agencies are always looking for unique features which allow their area to stand out. For example, the state of North Carolina invites travelers to "Come See the State That Kept the World's Second Oldest River From Dying of Unnatural Causes." In Ashe County, North Carolina, a golf course proclaims the course to be the "Newest Golf Course on the Oldest River" (Morgan and Mayfield 1994). In the New River Valley of Virginia, we are told in an advertisement that "America's Oldest River Flows Thru a Valley Rich in New Ideas. Your

Business will thrive in this Atmosphere." Finally, ads for recreational activities related to the New River almost without fail imply that an outdoor experience (e.g., white-water rafting, bass fishing) will be enhanced because of its association with the second-oldest river in the world (Morgan and Mayfield 1994).

The valley of the second-oldest river had become a popular region within a decade or less. We became aware of how popular the concept of a superlative age for the river had become in the early 1990s. Appalachian State University issued a press release describing our research on the New River, which mentioned that no studies could show that the New River was the second-oldest river, simply because it is difficult to do much more than talk about the relative age of an entire river. The reaction in the region was tremendous. Newspapers carried front-page stories about our claims that the New might not be as old as purported, and radio and television reported on our work as well. The tone of the media coverage was largely negative, and experts and interested persons were often given a chance to rebut our claims of an uncertain age for the New. While our only interest in the age of the New was academic in nature, some commentaries accused us of having an anti-environmental agenda.

Friends, neighbors, colleagues and others did not hesitate to question our motives, though their comments were often thinly veiled with a "kidding" tone. One colleague sadly asked, "How could you do this to our river?" When told of our comments about the age of the New, a newcom-



Used by permission of the National Committee for the New River (NCNR).

**Figure 1.** The New River Watershed.

er who had recently purchased property along the river may have summed up the feelings of other new migrants to the valley when she said: "I just paid a ridiculous price for my house and lot overlooking the New River, and now you want to tell me that the river is not the second-oldest river in the world. I don't want to hear that."

In spite of the reactions to our work, we believe that some were swayed by our arguments and became more reluctant to proclaim the river as the "second oldest." Such doubts were probably short-lived, however, because a higher power intervened on behalf of the second-oldest river. In 1998 the New River was proclaimed a Heritage River by President Bill Clinton, who came to the New River Valley of North Carolina to formalize the heritage designation. President Clinton seems to have become enthralled with the reputed age of the river, or at least in a calculated political decision, told the audience what they wanted to hear: an endorsement of the New River as not only a very old river, but the second-oldest river in the world. On the banks of the South Fork of the New River the President remarked:

If you look out at that river, just imagine what it would be like to be 300 million years old... Kind of heartwarming to know, isn't it, that the New River will be the same because of what you are doing here today? This ancient river has flowed through the heart of this land for millions of years. For millions of years, longer than blood has flowed through any human heart.....for scientists can tell by the river's location and direction of flow that it is not only the oldest river in North America, but the second oldest river on the face of the Earth (Clinton 1998).

If the President of the United States makes such a statement, it has great impact. In effect, the president's comments served to reassure all that the river really is the second-oldest in the world.

#### **ELECTRONIC PROMOTION OF THE "OLDEST RIVER"**

In the previous section, we presented evidence that allowed us to claim that the oldest river is a popular region. We did not, however, have evidence based on systematic collection of data or examination of documents. A variety of approaches has been used by scholars to identify popular or vernacular regions. Several writers have conducted surveys of college students to determine their perceptions of the locations and characteristics of regions (e.g., Jordan 1978; Good 1981). Reed (1976) examined business telephone listings to delineate the occurrence of the term "Dixie" in the South, while Zelinsky (1980) used phone listings to map American vernacular regions. Shortridge (1987) was able to identify and account for the changing usage of four broad American regional labels by examining responses to a warranty card by purchasers of a particular brand of citizen band radios. Others have found cyberspace to be a valuable resource for the

study of regions (e.g., Alderman and Cook 1997). The latter approach appeared to be feasible for our study of the "oldest river."

Searches for Internet information on the "New River" plus some form of "oldest river" were initiated during January and February 2004. Every day between 400 and 500 references were noted. The majority of Internet references to the New River during the survey period preferred to designate the New River as the "second oldest river in the world," although the label "oldest river in North America" is often used. More rarely used are references to the river's superlative age in the western hemisphere or the United States. References to the New River as "the oldest in North America" are often made in combination with the designation "second oldest river in the world."

Of 410 references found on February 28, 2004, 55 percent can be classified as selling or promoting a product, activity, or service, whereas 40 percent can be considered informational in nature. The other five percent are classified as personal. Of the messages designed to sell or promote, those advertising whitewater activities occurred most frequently, followed closely by ads for lodging in the New River Valley and those used by regional or state agencies to promote tourism, recreational activities, and economic development. Next in frequency of references associated with the old age of the New River were those initiated by local governments, chambers of commerce, and other local agencies to promote economic development and tourism.

Informational references most frequently emanated from educational organizations, environmental organizations, and government agencies. Other leading sources of informational entities were organizational newsletters, travel articles in magazines and newspapers, and activity reports of outdoor organizations. Most of the personal references were associated with personal or family home pages.

References to the superlative age of the New River in Internet communications show the broad-based perception that the "oldest river" has a positive place image. For example, the town of Beckley, West Virginia advertises that it "is within minutes of whitewater rafting on the oldest river in North America" (Pugh 2004), and a real estate ad offering a house for sale in Fries, Virginia states: "Beautifully renovated home located 100 yards from the New River (second oldest river in the world) where you can enjoy fishing, swimming, tubing & canoeing" (Anonymous 2004). The implications are that rafting on the oldest river is a superior experience and that the value of the property for sale is enhanced by its nearness to the second oldest river in the world. The positive image of the oldest river is more explicitly noted in an ad for rental property:

The New River Retreat is in the quiet Draper Valley nestled between the rolling hills of Virginia where one of the oldest rivers in the world flows. In fact, we're right on the river banks of the oldest river in North America

and second only to the Nile. This pristine, unspoiled river is called the New River (Blue Ridge Travel Association of Virginia 2004).

In describing its location for prospective students, the Radford University School of Nursing states that it "is a beautiful semi-rural area with rolling mountains, beautiful scenery, and the second oldest river in the world running through it" (Griggs 2004). If one is interested in graduate study in math, careful consideration should be given to Virginia Tech, located in Blacksburg, because, as the promotional literature indicates, the school is "only a few miles from" the second oldest river (Virginia Tech 2004).

The high number of electronic references to the superlative age of the New River combined with the prideful tone of those references help to confirm our contention that the oldest river qualifies as a popular region. The ongoing, daily occurrence of such messages also serves to inform any unknowing members of the populace about the age of the river and to reinforce the idea of the antiquity of the stream among the region's knowledgeable citizenry.

#### CONCLUSION

The promotion of a mythical age for the New River in the 1970s had two regional impacts. First, it had the intended effect of preventing the damming the New River. The second impact was the unintended laying of the foundation for the emergence of a popular region. The "oldest river" has become more than synonymous with the New River; it has taken on a life of its own in that many of those living within the river valley have a strong feeling of pride about the superlative age of their river. We became convinced that the oldest river was a popular region based on things that we heard and read about the stream. Our convictions were subsequently supported by references to the antiquity of the river discerned from an Internet search.

We are convinced that the oldest river is a popular region which came into existence because of a concocted geomorphic myth. What are we to do about this myth? It would probably be impossible to mount a successful campaign to discredit the "oldest river." We are simply content to have some understanding of how this fascinating popular region came into existence and has developed over time.

We encourage teachers to stress the study of popular or vernacular regions. Students often have a strong interest in their own vernacular region, have great pride in that region, and identify strongly with positive place images associated with it. Classroom activities that focus on identification of local regions and perceptions regarding those regions can be quite productive in middle school to college level classes. Such activities could include the production of mental maps derived from surveys conducted on and by students. Our work has shown that Internet searches can also play a valuable role in helping teachers and students identify and understand popular regions. We propose the following activity for high school or middle school teachers as an initial exploration into the study of vernacular or popular regions:

1. Assign two or three journal articles on vernacular regions as a required class reading. Introduce the concept of popular or vernacular regions, and lead class discussion of readings on the subject.
2. Administer a survey to your geography class that asks students to (a) identify the region in which they live, (b) describe the location of the region, and (c) mention any positive and/or negative characteristics associated with the region.
3. Compile results of the survey. Discuss findings with your class.
4. Have students request permission and administer a similar survey in other classes in your school.
5. Organize students into research groups. Allow them to determine if certain regional labels are commonly used by students, and, if so, what images are associated with the labels.
6. After regional labels have been identified, allow student groups to conduct Internet searches to determine to what extent, and in what manner, the labels are referenced electronically.
7. Supervise and assist groups as they write a short paper that describes findings and places them in the context of literature read.
8. Conclude project with class discussion that includes an assessment of the research as a learning experience.

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#### NOTES

1. A consequent stream is one that flows down the general slope of an uplifted region, as a consequence of its topography. Antecedent streams ignore the topography and structure of the region through which they flow because they were present before the uplift event. An antecedent stream is thus older than a set of mountains that it traverses.
2. Streams that cut across the topographic and structural grain of a mountain range are said to exhibit transverse drainage.
3. The Izaak Walton League, one of several environmental groups opposed to the damming of the New, may have been the first entity to have initiated unqualified claims of a superlative age for the New River, when in May 1973, its magazine, *Outdoor America*, in an unattributed article, proclaimed the New to be the second oldest river in the world, behind the Nile (Morgan and Mayfield 1994).

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