



# The History of Large Federal Dams: Planning, Design, and Construction

*U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, National Park Service, David P. Billington, Donald  
C. Jackson, Martin V. Melosi*

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The history of federal involvement in dam construction goes back at least to the 1820s, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built wing dams to improve navigation on the Ohio River. The work expanded after the Civil War, when Congress authorized the Corps to build storage dams on the upper Mississippi River and regulatory dams to aid navigation on the Ohio River. In 1902, when Congress established the Bureau of Reclamation (then called the “Reclamation Service”), the role of the federal government increased dramatically. Subsequently, large Bureau of Reclamation dams dotted the Western landscape. Together, Reclamation and the Corps have built the vast majority of major federal dams in the United States. These dams serve a wide variety of purposes. Historically, Bureau of Reclamation dams primarily served water storage and delivery requirements, while U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dams supported navigation and flood control. For both agencies, hydropower production had become an important secondary function. This history explores the story of federal contributions to dam planning, design, and construction by carefully selecting those dams and river systems that seem particularly critical to the story. Written by three distinguished historians, the history will interest engineers, historians, cultural resource planners, water resource planners and others interested in the challenges facing dam builders. At the same time, the history also addresses some of the negative environmental consequences of dam-building, a series of problems that today both Reclamation and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers seek to resolve.

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