

FDG_cycle23-24_progress_Stillman_12-30-24
Gordon Stillman, Assistant Professor, Visual Art
Project: Animating the Delaware River

Progress Report: Animating the Delaware River December 30th, 2024

Introduction

I received funding for the 23-24 Faculty Development Grant cycle to help complete my animation on the environmental history and imagined futures of the Delaware River. This project started in 2021 with a Mellon grant and immediately faced hurdles because conducting research and accessing special collections was severely limited due to Covid Restrictions—the original plan called for research, followed by script writing, followed by filming, scouting, and animating. After I discovered the difficulty of completing the project as planned, I reversed the intended order of the project and started with scouting, photographing, and filming, leaving the script writing, research, and animation for later, with the intent to write the script and complete the animation based on the scouting.

This process led to numerous project offshoots, including photo series, collages, and cyanotypes, some of which have already been exhibited, including a public art installation at Spruce Street Harbor Park, Philadelphia, this past summer ('24). Some of these auxiliary series have grown to independent projects in their own right, but the animation remained unfinished. The stated goal of my faculty development grant was to finish the animation, with the grant covering travel, filming, and research costs. In the proposal, I was hopeful of finishing the animation by the start of the Spring '25 semester, with the bulk of the work completed over the summer.

Research Overview + Progress

I was able to complete work over the summer that included filming and continuing the photographic and cyanotype series. Key places and events included horseshoe crab spawning in the Bay, cyanotype testing and creation at Washington's Crossing, and filming around Tock's Island near the Delaware Water Gap (Tock's Island was the site of a proposed dam that was nearly built). This work helped clarify some of the main elements and locations involved in the animation, and has already resulted in exhibition opportunities that include a photograph that won a juror's award for the exhibition *Before, During, After*, in conjunction with the 20/20 Photo Festival at Cherry Street Pier, Philadelphia (<https://www.2020photofestival.org/call-for-entry-2024>).

Setbacks and Plan Moving Forward

This past summer and fall ('24) presented numerous opportunities and challenges that reduced the time I planned to spend on the animation project. Over the summer, two things dramatically impacted the amount of time and energy I could commit to this project:

- 1) I decided to apply for tenure early and this required compiling my tenure packet. This took a lot of time, as expected, but I was not originally planning to do this when I submitted my FDG proposal (though I had made the decision by the time the acceptance letters went out in late april).
- 2) My mother-in-law was diagnosed with leukemia in the late spring and received treatment at HUP. She finished her last round of chemo this December and is in full remission (there are 3 types of leukemia and she got the one that is highly treatable, luckily), but she was in the hospital for a month for her initial treatment and stayed at our house for two weeks every two weeks for treatment over this time.

I was not able to travel to locations or spend as much time writing the script or animating as I thought over the summer, and that continued into the semester where chair duties and the switch to the 4-credit model are taking most of my time.

Despite these setbacks, I am hopeful I will finish the project by the time the final report is due (December 2025). I plan to spend some time in the Spring Semester on writing the script and finalize it over the summer. Once this is complete I hope final production can happen rapidly as I have most of the footage and material I need—though it is possible that my script will call for some elements that will complicate this timeline. The most likely delay will result from a decision to switch from an animation format to a live action film (predominantly—a mix was always planned) that may require actors or other elements that require more planning.