Confluences of water attract confluences of people. Throughout the history of human settlement of new landscapes the junctions of rivers and streams have been places that attract activity, like crossroads on the earth. The conjoining of these natural pathways brings peoples together, sometimes for the trade of goods and knowledge, sometimes for war, sometimes for marriage, following the landscape, along the valleys, down the river, to the mouth of the stream, from diverse points on a humbly constructed compass. Over time, confluences of cultural narratives and environmental patterns meld and reshape one another, forming larger contexts that in turn transform human perspectives and interaction with the environment.

The Susquehanna River’s confluence, near Bucknell University, constitutes the focus of the Social Sciences Colloquium and Humanities Institute for 2008-9. As befits the multifaceted nature of the area Bucknell has hosted interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary discussions of our immediate bioregion, one of the largest watersheds in the Eastern United States. Flowing into the Chesapeake Bay through the Northern Appalachian region, the Susquehanna River and its valleys and tributaries, first identified for Euro-Americans by John Smith in 1608, were central to Native Americans of the Eastern Woodlands and Atlantic coastal area long before European contact. However this watershed has since become almost culturally invisible at national and international levels, unlike some regions of the Southern Appalachians. Its confluence, once considered the “capital of the woodlands Indians,” has not received attention commensurate to its regional culture and history for a variety of socioeconomic reasons. Yet, as this focus year intends to show, this confluence provides us with a vital picture of early American culture. The river has fed many alternative traditions in American history—from the legendary ancestral culture of the Algonquin Indians to early Indian and European interactions at Shamokin, followed by Indian removal, to James Fenimore Cooper’s fantasy history of the devastated Eastern Woodlands, to the emergence of Mormonism, the economic development of the Industrial Revolution from natural resources and subsequent ethnic migrations, Amish settlement, and de-industrialization.

The confluence of the Susquehanna River, once home to the eighteenth century Shamokin community of Native Americans and their welcome guests, the Moravian Christians, remains a neglected focus of these historical connections with the rivers and valley. Its continuing combination of rich farmland and deeply entwined communities, together with changing demographics, provide an opportunity for the region to become an example for future sustainable development in North America. Yet how the area universities approach and participate in scholarship to relate the watershed as bioregion with the region as a zone of culture? This text continues on folded panel
year’s University Focus Year/Humanities Institute/Social Science Colloquium seeks to engage Bucknell’s renewed institutional focus on the environment with its backyard, in exploring the opportunity for scholarly work and engagement of students and faculty with the Susquehanna Valley, and respectfully challenging solely scientific paradigms for regional environmental study to extend further Bucknell’s existing cross-disciplinary engagements with the region.

Events in the “River Year” will proceed in the fall semester from theoretical approaches to region, to ecologically oriented science views of the watershed engaging human involvement in environmental restoration, to Native American reflections from across North America on the significance of the region’s history. In the spring, events will examine the Susquehanna Valley as a geographic region including human culture in a post-industrial era, explore the cultural narratives focused at its confluence in the stories of Old Shamokin, and finally focus on utopian projects associated with the emergence of U.S. rule in the region—all in relation to the physical environment of the river.