

# What's the Big Idea?

## The Nature of Citizenship

By Howard Silverman

"Declare your citizenship." It's not the sort of invitation we encounter every day. While "citizenship" may evoke memories of middle school civics classes, a closer look reveals shades of meaning not often encountered in any school system. This is a story that takes us back to the early days of our nation.

A decade after its founding, the young American republic seemed to be in peril. A revolt in the winter of 1786 had shaken the confidence of many, and national leaders gathered at a Constitutional Convention the following summer to reconsider their ideas about government.

The revolt left those of a more republican bent on the defensive, for they believed that the cultivation of civic virtues could provide the basis of a lasting government. "Educate and inform the whole mass of the people," wrote Thomas Jefferson, "Enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve them."

For Jefferson, virtue developed out of the agrarian lifestyle: "I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America." Ironically, this expansionist tendency of Jefferson's placed him at odds with his philosophical forbearer, Montesquieu. Montesquieu had written that the scale of the republic was a crucial consideration, because "in a small one, the interest of the public is more obvious, better understood, and more within the reach of every citizen."

A second, and ascending, view at the Convention, later associated with the Federalists, placed little faith in civic virtues. Alexander Hamilton declared, "Our prevailing passions are ambition and interest; and it will ever be the duty of a wise government to avail itself of those passions, in order to make them subservient to the public good."

And so, James Madison, writing in the Federalist Papers, turned the classical, small-state republicanism of Montesquieu on its head: "Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens." He championed a government of "distinct departments" and "balances and checks" as a way to combat the "violence of faction." It was a system that relied, not on finding common ground among peoples, but on, as Jean Jacques Rousseau had remarked, "keeping citizens apart."



## Natural Borders

Jefferson and Madison "extended the sphere" of the nation to include the lands of the Louisiana Purchase, and years later the Homestead Act of 1862 provided 160-acre parcels to those who would set up farms and dwellings on the new lands. But the Act proved inappropriate to the greater part of the landscape of the West. New arrivals found that the arid climate often made farming the land a cruel and unworkable proposition.

One early voice arguing for an alternative approach was that of John Wesley Powell. Better known today as a Civil War veteran and explorer of the Colorado River, Powell was also a skilled geographer and served as the Director of the U.S. Geological Survey through many of its early years. His 1878 *Report on the Lands of the Arid Regions* and 1890 articles in *Century Magazine* urged Congress to tailor the management of western lands to the realities of the landscape. His preferred unit of governance, the hydrographic district, was what we now call the watershed: a land area defined by a ridgeline and drained by a single stream system.

"This, then, is the proposition I make: that the entire arid region be organized into natural hydrographic districts, each one to be a commonwealth within itself for the purpose of controlling and using the great values which have been pointed out."

Although Powell's plans never carried the day, the farsightedness of several of their elements is now evident. A 1998 report to Congress entitled *Water in the West* follows in Powell's footsteps regarding watershed-scale management: "We should organize or integrate water planning, programs, agencies, funding, and decisionmaking around natural systems -- the watersheds and river basins."

And if the watershed is the natural seat for our local government, the equivalent of the county, then the larger geography that knits associated watersheds together is the bioregion: a biological region defined by the life and culture it supports. Take a look at a variety of bioregional visions, including Powell's map of hydrographic districts, on the page: Mapping As If Place Mattered.



"The watershed is the first and last nation whose boundaries, though subtly shifting, are unarguable."

– Gary Snyder,  
Poet and Essayist

Source:  
"Coming into the Watershed"

## The Value of Moss

"A rolling stone gathers no moss." We've heard the old saying so often that we scarcely notice the words. Is that good: to be rolling, not collecting moss? Recently, I've been posing this question to each person I meet, and the replies have been fairly divided. Back when John Heywood used the phrase in 1523, our values were more clear-cut. The original meaning, says the American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms, was that "one who never settles anywhere will not do well." Our bias toward moss, however, would recede.

Aside from Native Americans, each of us since Heywood's time has seen our stone or ancestors' stones roll across the ocean to the New World. And though there has been no American frontier left to settle for a hundred years now, many of us are still rolling. Just what is the essence of this moss that we so often neglect to gather?

Maybe it's in the narrative bonds that familiar locales inspire within us, in the confidence we find in our contribution, in our sense of belonging. Any of these may have been Heywood's moss and may still be ours. But today, in our frontier-less age, I see the essence of moss as something even more crucial: it represents the common unity to be won, not by checking and balancing one another, but by acknowledging our mutual inhabitation of a single region and seeking out a shared vision for our future here.

Declaring our citizenship in Salmon Nation does not make us any less American or Canadian, Californian or Alaskan. It is celebration of our common ground, a vow to live here like we mean it.

Welcome home to **Salmon Nation**. It's a place where we not only live, but thrive.



"What holds people together long enough to discover their power as citizens is their common inhabiting of a single place."

-- **Daniel Kemmis**

Former Mayor of Missoula, Montana

Source:

*Community and the Politics of Place*