

Research Article

Rewriting the Flats: Genre and Infrastructural Time in Constance Fenimore Woolson's "Round by Propeller" and "St. Clair Flats"

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Abstract: This article compares Constance Fenimore Woolson's two representations of the St. Clair Flats in "Round by Propeller" and "St. Clair Flats" to examine how literary forms organize the temporal visibility of infrastructural change. Rather than treating the canal solely as a symbol of industrial modernity or reading landscape change as the sole consequence of infrastructural development, this study uses comparative close reading to identify how the temporal status of infrastructure is constructed differently in the two genre forms. The analysis yields three configurations: Anticipated Infrastructure, where the straight canal presents itself as a future project promising to reduce detours and the burden of navigational attention; Realized Infrastructure through Retrospective Recognition, where the narrator's return in 1870 transforms the anticipated project into a retrospectively recognized change; and Obstructed Infrastructure, where the disruption of the canal in "Round by Propeller" forces the ship back to the old channel and expands narrative attention to the space traversed. The comparison demonstrates that infrastructural failure is not simply a theme: obstruction changes the route, and this change in route reorganizes narrative attention. This article uses infrastructural perceptibility as an umbrella concept and the temporal legibility of infrastructural change as its analytical mechanism. Read comparatively, the two texts demonstrate that literary forms shape infrastructural perceptibility by organizing how infrastructural change becomes legible through futurity, retrospective recognition, and breakdown. This contribution expands Woolson studies and literary infrastructure studies without generalizing genre distinctions beyond the use of both forms in Woolson's work.

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1. Introduction

Infrastructure in literature often becomes most readily recognizable when the relationships between everyday systems, movements, and expectations are disrupted. Susan (Star, 1999) shows how infrastructures that typically operate in the background can become highly visible in moments of breakdown, while (B. Larkin, 2013) expands attention to infrastructure from its material function to its political, sensory, and poetic dimensions. For literary studies, these issues open up the possibility of reading infrastructure not simply as a historical object present within a text, but as a material arrangement whose presence, promise, completion, or failure can interact with literary form (Aslami & Watson, 2024; Coldicutt, 2020; Kirkby, 2023).

This article examines these issues through Constance Fenimore Woolson's two representations of the St. Clair Flats in the Great Lakes. "Round by Propeller," published in Harper's New Monthly Magazine in 1872, is a travel narrative about a steamer's journey



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through the Great Lakes. When the Columbia reaches the St. Clair Flats, “some obstruction in the canal” prompts the captain to take “the old channel”; the change in route is immediately followed by passengers sitting in the bow, “eagerly watching” the space they are passing through (Woolson, 1872). “St. Clair Flats,” first published in 1873, employs a different temporal architecture. The narrative connects a visit in 1855 with a return in 1870. On the first visit, a captain envisions the possibility of “a straight canal” that would ease the difficulty of navigating the winding canals; on the second visit, the canal has become part of the changing landscape.

The similarity of setting does not make the two pieces work in the same way. In “St. Clair Flats,” the canal first appears as infrastructure-to-come and then becomes a recognizable change through return and memory. In “Round by Propeller,” the canal appears as a pre-existing navigation system but becomes narratively salient when obstruction makes the expected route unusable. This difference shifts the issue from a simple historical question—when was the canal built—to a formal one: how do the texts make infrastructural change perceptible through different temporal organizations?

This question is important because studies of Woolson have long demonstrated that the Great Lakes are not merely decorative settings in her works. (Brehm, 1990) reads Woolson's Great Lakes fiction through landscape and imaginative geography, while his discussion of *Castle Nowhere* shows that the region is reconstructed as a literary space, not simply transcribed from actual geography (Brehm, 2001). Brehm's more recent work has also expanded attention to the historical and political dimensions of Woolson's writing (Brehm, 2023). In the context of genre, (Berthold, 2001) examines persona in travel sketches, while (Sweet, 2011) shows that generic form in Woolson's travel writing can interact with modes of material knowledge. These studies have made clear that landscape, movement, and form in Woolson need to be read as part of an active literary construction.

Other studies reinforce the Great Lakes' position as a space where movement and regional meaning intertwine. Justice connects Woolson's Great Lakes fiction with shipwreck, providence, American identity, polar allusion, and the northern frontier (Justice, 2018, 2020). (Marino, 2021) situates the Great Lakes within Woolson's representation of the frontier, while (Aman, 2021) shows how Gothic spatiality and nation operate in tales of the Great Lakes. (Rioux, 2016) provides a biographical and literary-historical context for situating Woolson's early work, although this article does not use biography as evidence of authoritative intention. Together, these studies demonstrate that Woolson's Great Lakes are already understood as historically charged, aesthetically mediated, and formally constructed landscapes.

Precisely because the study has expanded so widely, this article's gap cannot be established by claiming that critics have not yet paid attention to landscape, movement, navigation, or genre. What remains to be sharpened is the more specific relationship between generic form, temporal organization, and changing navigational infrastructure. Previous studies provide a strong basis for understanding Woolson's landscape as an imaginative, political, regional, or epistemological space, but the two sections of the canal analyzed here allow for a narrower question: what happens when the same infrastructure appears in one text as a projected improvement that is then recognized retrospectively, and in another text as an already functioning route that becomes significant when it fails?

Recent scholarship has further emphasized the need for such contributions to be carefully formulated. *Secret Histories* demonstrates how Woolson studies now encompass a much broader range of forms, geography, archives, politics, and epistemologies (Gebhard et al., 2025). (West, 2025) returns attention to the Great Lakes landscape, while (Torsney, 2025) shows that navigational acts such as rowing can have epistemological consequences. This article therefore does not claim to discover a neglected Woolson or a neglected Great Lakes. Its contribution lies in the comparative formal relationship between two texts that reinscribe the same space under different temporal conditions of infrastructure.

This contribution can be clarified through the study of infrastructure and temporality. Infrastructure is not only present as a completed material system; it also operates through promise, expectation, waiting, deterioration, and imagined futures (Anand et al., 2018). (Appel, 2018) specifically discusses infrastructural time, while (Gupta, 2018) points to the tension between infrastructural futurity and ruin. In literary studies, (Martens & Vermeulen, 2021) develop the concept of infrastructural prolepsis to formally read future-oriented infrastructures, and (Addie et al., 2024) emphasize the plurality of infrastructural temporalities. For nineteenth-century studies, (Kirkby, 2023) shows that infrastructural logics

could be read even before the term “infrastructure” acquired its modern meaning; (Aslami & Watson, 2024) further position literary reading as a productive way to understand systems in glitch.

However, infrastructure theory in this article is not used as a template to be pasted onto Woolson. The sequence of analysis moves in the opposite direction: close reading first identifies how channels acquire different statuses in the two texts; theory is then used to name and sharpen the significance of these textual patterns. In this way, literary form remains at the center of inquiry, and infrastructure studies serves as a conceptual resource, not a disciplinary replacement.

The article uses infrastructural perceptibility as an umbrella concept for the conditions under which infrastructure and its associated transformations are available to narrative attention. This term is deliberately distinguished from simple visibility. Infrastructure can be mentioned explicitly but still not be central to perceptual organization; conversely, failure or temporal comparison can make a system's influence on movement and attention stronger than simply mentioning its object. Temporal legibility of infrastructural change refers to a more specific formal mechanism: change becomes legible because the text organizes the channel as anticipated, then recognized as realized, or foregrounded through obstruction. The term temporal access is used only descriptively and is not treated as an additional primary concept.

This framework also limits interpretation. The canal is not read as a simple symbol or villain of industrial modernity. In “St. Clair Flats,” the captain provides a practical rationale for the straight canal through the navigational difficulties evident in the textual world. Nor does the article assert that the canal alone causes all the ecological or social transformations the narrator later observes. Its relationship to broader landscape change is formulated through terms like accompanies, marks, is juxtaposed with, or participates in, rather than through causal totalization.

Based on this focus, the research asks two questions:

RQ1.How do “Round by Propeller” and “St. Clair Flats” organize the temporal status of the St. Clair? Clair canal, and how do those configurations differ across the two generic forms?

RQ2.What do these differences in temporal organization reveal about the role of literary form in making infrastructure change—and its relation to broader landscape transformation—perceptible in the St. Clair Flats?

The analysis yields three configurations: Anticipated Infrastructure, Realized Infrastructure through Retrospective Recognition, and Obstructed Infrastructure. The article's main argument is that, when read comparatively, literary form shapes infrastructural perceptibility by organizing the temporal legibility of infrastructural change. This claim is limited to Woolson's use of two generic forms in these two texts; the article does not generalize that fiction is inherently retrospective or that travel writing is inherently present-oriented.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design and Primary Texts

This study uses a comparative qualitative close reading of “Round by Propeller” (1872) and “St. Clair Flats” (1873). The selection of these two texts is based on the repetition of a single infrastructural problem—navigation through the St. Clair Flats—in two generic configurations that provide different temporal access to channel changes.

“Round by Propeller” first appeared in Harper's New Monthly Magazine 45 in September 1872, pages 518–533 (Woolson, 1872), and is later available in several modern collections, including the (Brehm & Dean, 2004). “St. Clair Flats” was first published in Appletons' Journal in 1873. For citation locators, this research uses the online edition of Story of the Week published by the Library of America in 2023 and sourced from Constance Fenimore Woolson: Collected Stories, edited by Anne Boyd Rioux. The original publication date is maintained so the citation is written as Woolson 1873 [2023].

The units of analysis are the sections that organize the relationships between canals, steering, routes, navigation, temporal transitions, and acts of perception. Close reading focuses primarily on projected infrastructure, statements regarding navigational difficulty and

efficiency, temporal transitions between 1855 and 1870, obstructions and rerouting, and changes in descriptive attention that follow route changes.

2.2 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework is operationalized through three questions. First, what is the temporal status of infrastructure within the passage being read? Narrative temporality is used to distinguish infrastructure as a projected future, a realized change recognized from a later temporal position, or a present system experiencing interruption. (Genette, 1980) uses this limited vocabulary to examine the relationship between narrative order and temporal positioning; the study does not apply his entire narratological taxonomy.

Second, how does this temporal status relate to expectation and transformation? The concepts of infrastructural time and promise help distinguish unrealized infrastructure from infrastructure that is already part of the material world (Anand et al., 2018; Appel, 2018; Gupta, 2018). (Martens & Vermeulen, 2021) help explain future-oriented infrastructural projections, while (Addie et al., 2024) support attention to the plurality of temporalities.

Third, what changes in narrative attention when infrastructural conditions change? (Star, 1999) provides a vocabulary for breakdown; (B. Larkin, 2013) and (Coldicutt, 2020) help connect infrastructure with perceptual and formal organization; (Kirkby, 2023) and (Aslami & Watson, 2024) place the question in literary and nineteenth-century contexts.

Of these three questions, infrastructural perceptibility is used to name the conditions under which infrastructure becomes available to narrative apprehension, while temporal legibility of infrastructural change is used to name the formal means through which transformation becomes legible. Both terms function as the result of analytical synthesis, not as the historical vocabulary that Woolson assumes they possess.

2.3 Comparative Close-Reading Procedure

The analysis was conducted in four steps. First, passages mentioning or describing canals, steering, routes, obstructions, temporal transitions, and material changes in the Flats were identified in both texts.

Second, each section is classified based on the temporal status of the infrastructure: projected future, retrospectively realized change, functioning present, or obstructed system.

Third, these temporal states are compared with changes in narrative attention, particularly descriptive density, acts of looking, spatial uncertainty, and the relationship between movement and landscape. In “Round by Propeller,” particular attention is paid to the sequence: obstruction → old-channel rerouting → intensified watching → descriptive expansion.

Fourth, the two texts are compared to determine how Woolson uses the two generic forms to provide different temporal access to infrastructural change. Because the corpus analysis consists of only two texts, interpretation is limited to formulations such as “in these two texts” and “Woolson's use of these two generic forms.”

2.4 Historical Control and Interpretive Boundaries

Historical materials are used as contextual controls, not as a third dataset. This distinction is important because the fictional chronology in “St. Clair Flats” cannot be treated as a direct documentary record of construction history. Nineteenth-century sources indicate that St. Clair Flats did present navigational difficulties and had been the subject of improvements in the 1850s. (“The St. Clair Flats and Lake Navigation,” 1855)“ documents contemporary navigational problems, while shipping and canal development histories indicate dredging and existing-channel improvements during that period (B. Larkin, 2013; Stone, 2015; Thompson, 2017).

The research firewall chronology is: 1850s = existing-channel dredging and navigational improvement efforts; late 1860s–early 1870s = later straight/new-channel phase, including new cut/new channel and associated navigational aids. United States Light-House Board records for 1870 are used only to control the chronology of the later phase (United States Light-House Board, 1870). Thus, the fictional setting of 1855 is not used as evidence that straight-channel construction historically did or did not begin in that exact year.

Historical records are also not used to infer authoritative intent. Without archival evidence directly linking Woolson to a federal engineering decision, historical materials serve only to prevent anachronism, chronology errors, and causal overreach.

3. Results

3.1 Anticipated Infrastructure: The Straight Canal as Future

In “St. Clair Flats,” the canals first take shape not as completed material structures, but as future propositions. In the fictional setting of 1855, the narrator and his companions enter the Flats through winding waterways. The landscape is organized through the tension between aesthetic appreciation and navigational difficulty. For the narrator, the Flats are a “beautiful winding waste of green” (Woolson, 2023); for the captain, the same network of channels is a practical problem.

The difference in perspective becomes even more apparent when the captain takes over steering as the steamer enters the “labyrinth” (Woolson, 2023). This term is not merely a descriptive metaphor for spatial complexity. In the context of navigation, the labyrinth marks a landscape that must be continuously read through turns, channel recognition, steering adjustments, and anticipation of possible grounding. The captain explains that the Flats pose a problem because ships can run aground and “block up the way” (Woolson, 2023). Thus, spatial irregularity not only produces visual richness for the narrator but also time-consuming labor for the ship’s operator.

It was from this practical difficulty that the projection arose that Uncle Sam might build a canal “right through, —a straight canal” (Woolson, 2023). The opposition between labyrinth and straightness transformed the landscape from a present configuration into a space imaginable through possible future alignments. The straight canal was not simply a new object to be added to the Flats; it was a proposal to change the relationship between ships and space.

Straightness therefore has both spatial and temporal functions. Spatially, the projected canal will cut through the winding arrangement of channels. Temporally, it is not yet experienced infrastructure; it exists as rumor, possibility, and delayed expectation. The captain even doubts whether he will still be “on the waters” when the work is completed (Woolson, 2023). The canal thus appears in the narrative not through material presence, but through anticipation of a different navigational future.

This futurity also gives infrastructure an effect before completion. Once the possibility of a straight canal is mentioned, the reader no longer sees only the present flats. Existing channels can now be compared to routes that do not yet exist. Windingness takes on a second meaning: beyond being a visual characteristic, it becomes something that future engineering might mitigate. In this sense, projected infrastructure begins to reorganize perception before reorganizing geography.

The projected canal also brought the promise of navigational time. The captain emphasized “what a saving it would be” (Woolson, 2023). This saving need not be reduced to measurable travel time. In this passage, present navigation involves repeated turning, steering, watching, and adjusting to uncertain waterways. The captain later emphasized the need to “turn and twist and watch” along the marsh (Woolson, 2023). Straightness promised a reduction in this series of acts. Efficiency thus had a perceptual consequence: a more direct route potentially reduced the need to constantly read the landscape as a navigational problem.

This makes the narrator-captain contrast more complex than the opposition of nature versus technology. The narrator views the possibility of a straight canal with “dismay” and imagines it as “an ugly utilitarian ditch” (Woolson, 2023), while the captain articulates improvements from the standpoint of navigational labor. Neither perspective completely cancels out the other. The narrator’s aesthetic response does not eliminate the practical difficulty, while the captain’s utility argument does not erase the fact that straightening would alter the spatial experience that makes the Flats distinctive for the narrator.

This tension is crucial because the canal does not appear as a single moral symbol. It simultaneously represents imagined efficiency and anticipated alteration. Infrastructure becomes perceptible not because it has been built, but because the possibility of building provides a new temporal frame for reading the present landscape. Readers are encouraged to see Flats as a space that not only “is,” but also a space that might soon be otherwise.

The temporal grammar of this section reinforces this condition. The channel is discussed through possibilities, expectations, and uncertain future completion. Even the captain, who supports its practical value, doesn't control the timeline of its realization. Infrastructure presents itself as a promise whose material future remains temporally distant from the narrative present. This uncertainty distinguishes it from later return, when the project is no longer discussed as hypothetical.

Thus, the first configuration, Anticipated Infrastructure, refers to more than just a canal that is "not yet built." It names the condition where possible infrastructure already has formal consequences because future intervention enters present perception. The straight canal becomes a temporal reference point through which winding landscapes, navigational labor, and imagined efficiency can be reread even before the alteration is realized.

3.2 From Projection to Realization: The 1870 Return

The most defining temporal shift in "St. Clair Flats" is summarized by the phrase "Years rolled away" (Woolson, 2023). The formula seems simple, but formally it moves the narrative from a world where the straight canal was still hypothetical to a moment when the narrator can see the effects of intervening time. The temporal gap between the first visit and the return in 1870 deliberately leaves the construction process largely unnarrated.

This absence is significant. The reader does not follow the surveying, dredging, federal deliberation, engineering labor, or gradual completion of the canal. By omitting these processes, the narrative shifts the emphasis from how the infrastructure was built to how completed change is recognized. Construction becomes a temporal blank, while memory and return become mechanisms of legibility.

In 1855, the straight canal was only available as a prediction. In 1870, the narrator brings back memories of the earlier Flats and can now recognize the canal as an alteration that has occurred. The text states that the canal "had been cut" (Woolson, 2023). This grammatical form positions intervention as an accomplished action whose process lies outside the immediate narration. What matters is not the construction of the spectacle but the altered relationship between the present landscape and the remembered past.

Therefore, completed infrastructure gains meaning through retrospective recognition. The reader was previously shown a moment when the straight canal was still a possible future; when the narrator returns, the completion carries traces of that former futurity. The canal in 1870 is not simply an object that currently exists. It is also the fulfillment of an earlier projection the narrative had harbored during the temporal gap.

Memory here is not decorative nostalgia. It functions as a comparative instrument. Without a first visit, the canal in 1870 can appear as an ordinary part of the navigational environment. Because the narrator and reader have an earlier image of the winding Flats and a conversation about future straightness, material change becomes legible as transformation. The narrative temporal structure thus generates comparisons that do not need to be expressed through formal before-and-after exposition; memory itself does the comparative work.

The Return also changes the narrator's epistemic position. On the first visit, knowledge of the future canal was speculative and came primarily from the captain. On the second visit, the narrator has an experiential position from which former speculation can be assessed against an altered world. Thus, temporal movement is also a movement in knowledge: what was once heard as a possibility becomes recognizable as historical fact.

However, the narrative doesn't transform this realization into a celebration of technological progress. The canal, which had been cut, appears alongside broader changes in the Flats. This article doesn't read this juxtaposition as proof that the canal alone caused the entire transformation. Rather, the completed infrastructure serves as a marker of the temporal distance between the remembered and present landscapes. The canal participates in the legibility of change because it represents a material difference comparable to the former projection.

The return structure also creates an interesting asymmetry. The construction process is absent, but the consequences of elapsed time are powerful. "Years rolled away" compresses a fifteen-year historical interval into a brief transition, so the reader experiences the transformation almost as a sudden recognition. This formal compression makes change feel less like a slow accumulation followed step by step, but rather like an altered world encountered after absence.

The ending, which refers to the Flats as “passing away” (Woolson, 2023), further expands the temporal horizon. The future improvement envisioned in 1855 has transformed into accomplished infrastructure in 1870; but the present of realization is not the final temporal point. The narrative projects another future—the prospect of further disappearance. Thus, the temporal arc is not simply undeveloped past → improved present, but rather anticipated future → realized change → renewed anticipation of loss.

This structure precludes simple teleology. The completion of the canal does not close history; it is situated within a broader sequence of changes. The infrastructure that previously symbolized possible future improvement becomes an object of retrospective recognition, while the landscape itself is repositioned within the horizon of futurity through “passing away.”

The configuration of Realized Infrastructure through Retrospective Recognition therefore names a literary mechanism, not simply a historical status. Infrastructure becomes legible as realized change because the text has provided the reader with two temporal standpoints and maintained the relationship between them. Story form transforms the former future into a remembered past, so that the channel can be read not only as a structure but as material evidence of an elapsed transformation.

3.3 Obstructed Infrastructure: Rerouting through the Old Channel

“Round by Propeller” organizes the canal into different temporal states. There is no fifteen-year return structure that allows readers to compare projected infrastructure with completed changes. Instead, the canal appears as an already available navigational system that suddenly becomes unusable.

The key passage is very direct. After the Columbia enters St. Clair Flats, the narrator explains that “there was some obstruction in the canal.” As a result, the captain “was obliged to take the old channel.” The passengers’ reaction is immediate: they sit in the bow, “eagerly watching the strange scene” (Woolson, 1872).

This sequence is the third central outcome: obstruction → old-channel rerouting → intensified watching → descriptive expansion.

The first occurrence is an interruption in the route's infrastructure. The text doesn't elaborate on the nature of the obstruction. Interpretatively, this ambiguity shifts the emphasis from engineering cause to consequence. The canal cannot function as the expected passage; ships must therefore use the old channel.

The change in route then changes the position of attention. Passengers don't just arrive at a different location; they move to the bow and become “eagerly watching.” This phrase explicitly states increased perceptual activity. The old channel isn't just longer or less direct. It allows for a different mode of looking.

After the statement “eagerly watching,” the prose expands. The low meadow opens “as far as we could see,” cut through countless channels like “a network of silver upon green” (Woolson, 1872). Reeds nearly touch the ship; birds stand in the water; the route appears blocked by a green island, making the ship appear landlocked. The captain then gives a rapid order, the chains rattle, and the Columbia turns into a hidden channel. Narrative attention follows this maneuver in detail.

Spatial uncertainty intensifies as other ships appear to sail “mysteriously over the meadow.” They disappear and reappear relative to the Columbia. Small lighthouses, signs, pieces of cloth, bent saplings, huts, shore, and water enter the perceptual field. At one point, the narrator admits that the passengers “were never sure where the water ended and shore began” (Woolson, 1872). The old-channel route thus produces a descriptive encounter that relies on uncertainty and continual adjustment.

This finding does not mean that obstruction restores the pristine nature previously hidden by infrastructure. The old channel itself was a navigational path; lighthouses and signs indicate that the route was also mediated by navigational technologies. What has changed is not the opposition between infrastructure and non-infrastructure, but the relationship between route and attention.

Canal obstruction makes the expected passage unavailable. Rerouting leads the ship into a more winding and uncertain spatial experience. The text captures these changes through intensified viewing and descriptive expansion.

This results in a higher-order finding: failure changes the route, and the changed route reorganizes narrative attention.

This claim stems from the sequential organization of the parts themselves. A new theory of breakdown is needed in the Discussion to explain the broader implications of this pattern.

A comparison with "St. Clair Flats" highlights the crucial reversal. In the fictional 1855 scene, a straight canal is projected as a solution to a navigational arrangement that requires repeated turning and watching. In "Round by Propeller," an obstruction in the canal forces the ship back to its old route, and with that rerouting comes the return of turns, uncertainty, and intensified looking.

Therefore, Obstructed Infrastructure does not mean that infrastructure becomes perceptible simply because the reader is informed that an obstruction is present. More importantly, the breakdown alters the conditions under which the landscape itself can be perceived. Failure reorganizes passage through space, and altered passage reorganizes attention to that space.

4. Discussion

4.1 Genre and Infrastructure Time

Three findings indicate that the infrastructural time in both texts is not identical to the chronology of canal construction. What is relevant for literary analysis is how the narrative organizes the temporal status of the infrastructure for the reader. "St. Clair Flats" moves from a projected future to a completed change, read through return. "Round by Propeller" presents the canal as an already functioning system that comes to the foreground when normal passage is disrupted. These differences demonstrate that infrastructure can have the same material chronology but acquire different narrative temporalities.

This distinction is important because chronological sequence alone is insufficient to explain formal effects. Historically, canal improvement can be placed within a specific engineering timeline. Literary texts, however, do not necessarily follow that timeline documentary-likely. "St. Clair Flats" chooses the temporal positions of 1855 and 1870 and almost omits the years of construction in between. "Round by Propeller" chooses an immediate episode of travel where the already-existing canal suddenly ceased functioning. Thus, texts not only record different moments of infrastructure; they select and organize different temporal relations to infrastructure.

The relationship is related to genre, but the article does not make a universal distinction between fiction and travel writing. (Berthold, 2001) and (Sweet, 2011) have shown that Woolson actively uses travel persona and generic conventions, while (Torsney, 2025) shows that navigation can have epistemological effects. Genre is therefore more appropriately treated as a formal resource that enables different organizations of experience, not a taxonomy that automatically determines a particular mode of temporality.

In "St. Clair Flats," the story structure allows the 1855 projection to be maintained until the 1870 return. This temporal relation allows the completed canal to carry the memory of its status as a possible future. In broad narratological terms, the meaning of a later event is shaped by its relation to an earlier temporal position (Genette, 1980). Importantly, the narrator does not need to explain the construction history for the transformation to be meaningful. The formal arrangement between projection and return is sufficient to make the canal historically legible.

This illustrates the difference between historical knowledge and narrative recognition. Historical knowledge might answer when a project was built, who worked on it, and what stages it went through. Narrative recognition in "St. Clair Flats" operates through memory structures: the reader recognizes the canal as change because they have previously observed its absence and anticipation. Literature, therefore, does not replace historical accounts, but rather organizes the experiential relationship to change differently.

Infrastructure studies help clarify the significance of this pattern. Infrastructure can be present through promises before material completion (Anand et al., 2018), and infrastructural time can connect expectation, waiting, completion, and altered futures (Appel, 2018; Gupta, 2018). The future orientation in "St. Clair Flats" also resonates with (Martens & Vermeulen, 2021) attention to infrastructural prolepsis. However, Woolson's text adds a formal twist: the former futurity acquires new meaning when the narrator returns from a later temporal position. Prediction doesn't just point forward; after the return, it can also be read backward as remembered anticipation.

"Round by Propeller" offers a different kind of temporal access. The reader gains historical depth not through return, but through the interruption of the ongoing journey. The channel previously functioned as an assumed route. The obstruction then changes its status from a background condition of movement to an immediate problem. Infrastructural time here is not a long arc between projection and completion, but rather a compressed temporality of disruption: expectation, interruption, rerouting, renewed movement.

The travel narrative allows the event to remain tied to the ship's sequential movements. Breakdown is not a retrospective memory; it occurs as a contingency during the journey. As the route changes, spatial experience and descriptive attention also shift. This genre relation isn't because all travel writing is necessarily immediate, but rather because "Round by Propeller" specifically organizes its journey through unfolding encounters. Infrastructure becomes legible at the moment its operation ceases to be predictable.

The comparison therefore reveals at least three distinct temporal modes: infrastructure as not-yet, infrastructure as already-changed, and infrastructure as no-longer-working-as-expected. (Addie et al., 2024) help situate this plurality within a broader understanding that infrastructure operates through heterogeneous temporalities, but literary comparisons demonstrate how that heterogeneity can be formally produced.

The first answer to RQ2 is therefore more precise than the statement that genre "influences" perception. Literary form determines the temporal position from which infrastructure becomes recognizable as changing. In one text, the reader must recall an earlier projection to recognize a realization. In another text, the reader must follow an interruption to see how an assumed system becomes newly salient. Infrastructure is not a literary object simply because it is called that; form governs the conditions of temporal recognition.

4.2 Rewriting the Flats: From Efficiency to Perceptibility

The most productive comparison arises when the promise of straightness in "St. Clair Flats" is placed alongside the rerouting in "Round by Propeller." In the fictional 1855 scene, the captain envisions a straight canal as a solution to winding navigation. The old arrangement required turning, twisting, steering, and watching. A straight canal would save money and make the route more direct.

Formally, future infrastructure therefore promises a certain reduction in navigational attention. This doesn't mean that canals will literally make the landscape invisible. What is projected is a change in the relationship between movement and the environment: fewer detours, less uncertainty, and a reduced need to constantly adjust direction within labyrinthine channels.

"Round by Propeller" presents the inverse situation. The channel is already available, but obstruction makes normal passage impossible. The Columbia returns to the old channel. After that, the text doesn't become more concise; it becomes more descriptively expansive. Passengers "eagerly" watch (Woolson, 1872). Hidden channels, misleading islands, uncertain boundaries, markers, lighthouses, ships, reeds, and birds enter the field of representation.

This is where (Star, 1999) helps without taking over close reading. Breakdowns can make infrastructure more perceptible because expected background operations are disrupted. However, Woolson's passage demonstrates something more literary: breakdowns don't simply direct attention to the channel as a failed object. Breakdowns change the route, and the route change determines what can then be seen and how the narrative sees it.

Therefore, infrastructural perceptibility in this article is not synonymous with infrastructural visibility. (B. Larkin, 2013) reminds us that infrastructure has a poetics that regulates sensory and aesthetic experience, while (Coldicutt, 2020) suggests that literary form can be an important medium for examining this relationship. (Aslami & Watson, 2024) specifically emphasize the potential of glitch as a moment when systems and representational practices can be read together.

Woolson allows the relationship to be formulated more granularly: failure → route change → perceptual change → narrative change.

This sequence explains why comparing the two texts yields something that isn't quite apparent when read separately. In "St. Clair Flats," the straight canal represents an imagined reduction of winding navigational effort. In "Round by Propeller," obstruction temporarily suspends efficient routing and results in a return to winding spatial experience. One imagines the disappearance of repeated adjustments; the other makes repeated adjustments and observations reappear.

The title of the article, “Rewriting the Flats,” points to this reversal. Woolson doesn't simply describe the same place twice. The Flats become textually available under different infrastructural conditions. In one configuration, a future canal reorganizes the imagination of the landscape before its completion. In another, a failed canal reorganizes the actual route of narration.

Perceptibility therefore has both temporal and spatial dimensions. Infrastructure is read differently depending on whether it is in the future, retrospectively completed, or obstructed present. The term temporal legibility of infrastructural change captures this mechanism. Temporal organization provides the reader with a position to recognize change; literary form determines how that position is constructed.

This claim also helps prevent the reduction of the canal to a simple symbol of industrial modernity. Canals are indeed associated with efficiency, federal improvement, and the transformation of navigation. But the narrative does not offer a moral equation in which winding landscapes are always good and straight canals are always bad. The captain's practical perspective has legitimacy: Flats are indeed difficult to navigate. Historical materials also show that navigational problems and improvement efforts are not mere fiction. However, the literary text does not stop at the utility question. It shows what happens to conditions of attention when navigational systems change or fail.

Thus, the infrastructure-landscape relationship in both texts is more accurately formulated as a juxtaposition and participation in broader transformation. The canal may signal change and contribute to shaping the experience of the changed Flats, but evidence does not support the claim that the canal alone causes all ecological, aesthetic, or social loss. The ending, which projects the Flats as “passing away” (Woolson, 2023), should be read as a temporal projection that broadens the sense of transformation, not as a causal indictment traceable to a single engineering intervention.

4.3 Implications for Woolson Studies and Literary Infrastructure Studies

For Woolson studies, this comparison extends research that has shown that the Great Lakes landscape is an active element in Woolson's imaginative work. (Brehm, 1990, 2001) positions regional space as a constructed literary environment, while (Justice, 2018, 2020), (Marino, 2021), and (Aman, 2021) expand this attention through shipwrecks, frontiers, national imagination, and Gothic spatiality. More recent studies have also increasingly emphasized the relationship between geography, form, politics, and epistemology in Woolson's work (Brehm, 2023; Gebhard et al., 2025; Torsney, 2025; West, 2025).

The findings of this article do not require us to replace the terms of these studies with the vocabulary of infrastructure. Instead, infrastructure provides a narrow comparative object through which several of Woolson's studies' concerns can be reconciled. Kanal simultaneously relates to movement, landscape, modernization, federal improvement, visual experience, and narrative form. Because the same object appears in two texts with different temporal statuses, the comparison allows us to see not only what Woolson represents but also how formal organization changes the terms under which regional transformation becomes apprehensible.

This adds a dimension to Woolson's study of the Great Lakes landscape. If landscape has been understood as an imaginative, regional, national, or Gothic construction, a close reading of the canals shows that landscape can also be conditioned by routes of passage. The flats are not only available to the narrator as a visual scene; they are traversed through channels that regulate where ships move, how they turn, and what passengers must watch. Infrastructure, therefore, is not external to the landscape description. It partly shapes the conditions under which description occurs.

This implication is most evident in “Round by Propeller.” Descriptive expansion does not occur before the navigational event but after the rerouting. This suggests that literary landscapes can be shaped by the mobility system formally: the route determines the sequence of encounters. Thus, Woolson's study of regional space can be expanded by paying attention to the relationship between the movement of infrastructure and descriptive form, without having to turn the article into a transport history.

In “St. Clair Flats,” the implications are slightly different. Here, the canal does not primarily organize the immediate descriptive sequence through failure, but rather organizes historical comparison. The straight canal provides one of the material differences through

which the narrator recognizes elapsed transformation. Thus, the infrastructure-landscape relationship has two formal dimensions in this small corpus: infrastructure can alter the path of looking and can be a marker of temporal difference.

For literary infrastructure studies, these findings shift the question from “where does infrastructure appear in literature?” to “how does literary form make infrastructure recognizable as a changing system?” Studies have emphasized breakdown, promise, temporality, aesthetics, and future orientation (Anand et al., 2018; Appel, 2018; Gupta, 2018; J. D. Larkin, 2018; Star, 1999). Studies of nineteenth-century literature have also increasingly demonstrated that infrastructural logics could be analyzed even before the modern terminology of infrastructure was established (Aslami & Watson, 2024; Kirkby, 2023).

Woolson's two texts demonstrate that literary contributions to infrastructure studies don't have to be explicit reflections on engineering systems. Literature can generate knowledge about infrastructure through formal arrangements of time and attention. A future canal can make a present landscape appear potentially replaceable. A completed canal can become historically meaningful when juxtaposed with a remembered absence. A failed canal can change the route and thus alter the perceptual field.

From this, infrastructural perceptibility differs from simple visibility in two ways. First, what becomes perceptible is not just infrastructure as an object, but the relationship between infrastructure and movement. Second, perceptibility can emerge without breakdown if the narrative provides a temporal comparison that makes material change recognizable. Star's emphasis on breakdown is helpful for “Round by Propeller,” but “St. Clair Flats” shows that retrospective structure can also make infrastructure newly apprehensible.

Therefore, this umbrella concept allows both texts to be placed within a single analytical framework without forcing them to follow identical mechanisms. In “St. Clair Flats,” perceptibility emerges through anticipation → realization → recognition. In “Round by Propeller,” it emerges through the normal route → obstruction → rerouting → intensified attention. What unites the two is not a single type of infrastructure event, but rather a literary organization that makes the transformation readable through temporal relations.

This mechanism is called the temporal legibility of infrastructural change. This term emphasizes that material alteration does not automatically produce literary meaning. To be legible as change, infrastructure must be situated in relation to other temporal conditions: before/after, expected/interrupted, possible/realized. Literary form provides these relations through sequencing, memory, return, interruption, and descriptive pacing.

The broader implication is that literary infrastructure studies could benefit from closer attention to formal mediation, not just thematic presence. Identifying a railway, canal, telegraph, road, or port in a literary text is a first step; the next question is how narrative order, focalization, pacing, genre, or descriptive structure organizes these systems as perceptual and temporal events. Woolson's two texts provide limited but clear cases to demonstrate the value of this approach.

This claim remains intentionally bounded. The article does not claim that Woolson is an “infrastructure theorist” *avant la lettre*, that the two texts are the first literary representations of Great Lakes infrastructure, or that the contrast found applies to fiction and travel writing in general. Its contribution is to show that in Woolson's two representations of the same space, generic-temporal organization produces different forms of infrastructural perceptibility. This limitation makes the contribution more defensible: the novelty lies in the comparative mechanism, not in the claim of untouched subject matter.

5. Conclusion

This article shows that the St. Clair Canal takes on three distinct temporal configurations in Woolson's two texts. In “St. Clair Flats,” the straight canal initially appears as Anticipated Infrastructure: a future improvement projected as a solution to winding navigation. After a temporal leap and return in 1870, the former projection becomes Realized Infrastructure through Retrospective Recognition. Completion gains meaning because the reader still retains the memory of the moment when the canal was only a possible future.

In “Round by Propeller,” the channel appears as an already functioning navigational system that becomes foregrounded when it encounters obstruction. Rerouting through the old channel then results in intensified viewing and descriptive expansion. Obstructed

Infrastructure therefore reveals a more specific sequence than visibility through breakdown: failure changes the route, and the changed route reorganizes narrative attention.

RQ1 is thus answered through these three configurations—anticipated, retrospectively realized, and obstructed infrastructure. RQ2 is answered by comparing how the two texts provide temporal access to transformation. In “St. Clair Flats,” return and memory make change legible retrospectively; in “Round by Propeller,” breakdown and rerouting alter the immediate conditions of movement and perception.

On that basis, the article's contribution can be formulated briefly: Read comparatively, the two texts suggest that literary form shapes infrastructural perceptibility by organizing the temporal legibility of infrastructural change.

Infrastructural perceptibility refers to the conditions under which infrastructure becomes available to literary attention, while temporal legibility of infrastructural change explains how anticipation, retrospective recognition, and obstruction make the transformation legible. This approach allows the canal to be understood without being reduced to a simple symbol of industrial modernity or the sole cause of broader landscape transformation.

For Woolson's studies, this reading demonstrates that the Great Lakes landscape is organized not only through imagery and regional meaning, but also through changing relations between navigation, routes, temporality, and attention. For literary infrastructure studies, both texts demonstrate that nineteenth-century literary form can produce knowledge about infrastructure by organizing not only what a system appears to be, but also when, from where, and under what conditions its change becomes perceptible.

Because this study is limited to two texts and one regional infrastructural problem, its claims must remain local. Comparative work on Woolson's other Great Lakes writings, or on nineteenth-century travel and fictional representations of canals by other authors, could test whether the relationships between route, temporal organization, and perceptibility found here operate through similar or different mechanisms.

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