Southern Illinois | Ohio River Valley

**Forsaken Egypt: Poverty darkens Southern Illinois’ beautiful Ohio River Valley region**

The 981-mile Ohio River begins in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and borders or runs through six states, including a 133-mile leg along the southern border of Illinois. The Ohio enters the state near Uniontown, Kentucky, which is about 15 minutes from Old Shawneetown in Gallatin County, and then runs alongside Hardin, Pope, Massac, Pulaski and Alexander counties.

It ends in historic Cairo at Fort Defiance, where it feeds into its storied sister, the Mississippi, and heads south toward New Orleans. Though less celebrated through time in comparison to the Mississippi, the economic artery that pumps through the Heartland has quite the American story to tell, too. It is a tale of triumph and betrayal.

This region helped build Illinois at statehood in 1818. Almost 200 years later, as Illinois prepares to celebrate its bicentennial, lower "Egypt" — as its affectionately known — has largely been forsaken, or so it seems to many of the people who call Illinois’ Ohio River Valley region home.

“When Chicago was just getting started people laughed and said, ‘You’ll never amount to nothing without the Ohio River,’” said Rhonda Belford, president of the Ohio River Scenic Byway in Illinois. “Now, the tables have turned. It’s like we’ve been forgotten down here.”

However, Belford, a resident of Hardin County, is convinced there will be a new day for the region.

Any one community here may not be too big to fail — many already have — but considered collectively as a nine-county region, close to 95,000 people still live here — making it slightly bigger by population than the suburban Lake County city of Waukegan. This part of Illinois has too much potential to wither into oblivion, Belford said.

Ohio is an Iroquoian Indian word derived from the Seneca name for the Ohio River, Ohi:yo’, meaning great river. The French took to calling it “La Belle Riviere” — translated as beautiful river. During the Civil War, slaves seeking freedom across the river that represented the dividing line between north and south referred to it as the “River Jordan.”

“It really doesn’t get prettier than this,” Belford said as she navigated a winding road from Elizabethtown to Rosiclare. The mesmerizing view out the window was of acres of freshly harvested farmland giving way to the rolling hills of the Shawnee National Forest.

Only recently, the cool weather snap had turned the leaves shades of bright yellow, red and orange. But as one hand giveth, the other takes away.

The scenic natural beauty that has blessed the bottom stretch of Illinois is interrupted by harsh living conditions for too many. As job opportunities fall to the wayside, temperatures are rising, and it’s understandable why. The river keeps secrets.

Too many children go hungry. Too many people live in barely-standing shanty shacks held together by shoddy repairs, and seemingly, a hope and a prayer.

“In that area, you have the worst rural poverty in the state, without question,” said Christopher Merrett, director of the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University.

### **'The worst'**

For the purpose of this article, the valley region is defined as Illinois’ six counties that border the Ohio River — Gallatin, Hardin, Pope, Massac, Pulaski and Alexander — plus their three closest neighbors — Johnson, Union and Saline (This boundary is not an exact science; The Southern's intention was to examine Illinois' southernmost counties facing common economic concerns. Alexander and Union also border the Mississippi River).

Below are some statistics that further explain what a drive around the Ohio River Valley region makes apparent: an economic crisis has taken root here.

• In all nine counties, the percent of people living below the poverty line is greater than the overall statewide rate of 14.3 percent, as of 2015 estimates published by the U.S. Census.

• According to Fahe, an organization dedicated to the elimination of poverty in the Appalachia, the average poverty rate of the counties that make up the [Appalachian region is 19.7 percent](https://fahe.org/appalachian-poverty). The average poverty rate for the nine Illinois counties that constitute the Illinois Ohio River Valley region is 19.9 percent, as of the 2015 U.S. Census estimates.

• In four of the nine counties, the poverty rates are above 20 percent. They are Alexander, at 34 percent; Saline County, at 23 percent; Hardin, 21 percent; and Pulaski 20 percent.

• In five of these counties, more than 10 percent of veterans are living in poverty (the statewide rate is 7 percent): Alexander, at 20 percent; Johnson, at 11 percent; and Massac, Pulaski and Union at just above 10 percent each.

Though rural poverty can appear shocking to those unaccustomed to its manifestations, it’s not like a natural disaster that easily gets the attention of political leaders, in Springfield or Washington. Yet, persistent rural poverty leaves thousands of families, children and the elderly without adequate shelter, food, educational opportunities, and access to healthcare.

That’s not to say the U.S. has perfected its response to natural disasters — look no further than Puerto Rico to see the massive challenges facing the nation’s crisis response system — but the country does respond. People living in devastating rural poverty are rarely the priority, Merrett said.

“There will always be excuses for why government can’t address struggling communities,” he said. “Because it’s easier to put out the wildfire, and it’s easier to rebuild after a tornado, or a hurricane. But to address the chronic and secular decline, and I mean uninterrupted decline, facing many rural communities, that’s not exciting.

“That would be like, literally, watching paint crack and peel. It’s a slow deterioration. It’s very unexciting.”