

Abstract

WERE THEY LIABLE? COMPARING THE JOHNSTOWN FLOOD MUSEUM AND THE JOHNSTOWN FLOOD NATIONAL MEMORIAL. (Under the direction of Dr. John Tilley) Department of History, June 2006.

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the valuable lessons that can be learned by having two sites based on the same topic: history can be taught in different ways, from different perspectives, with different objectives. In Johnstown, Pennsylvania, two historic sites decided to commemorate the Flood of 1889, which was caused by the failure of a dam owned by wealthy, Pittsburgh industrialists.

The Flood Museum, a local entity, presents the Pittsburghers in a less than favorable light. Employees feel that it does not do the story, or the people of Johnstown, justice to exclude issues of liability. The Flood Memorial, an affiliate of the National Park Service, attempts to steer clear of the controversy. Its employees remind visitors that the documentation needed to prove the Pittsburghers were aware of the failing condition of the dam does not exist.

Visitors often stop at both sites when they travel to Johnstown. Many people, when confronted with these differences in interpretation, choose to agree with one site. Others wonder if one method of interpretation is better than the other. Most visitors do not understand why there are two sites nor do they realize that the sites cooperate with each other. This thesis provides insight into these lesser known details of the sites. The story of the Johnstown Flood has been told many times, yet the story of the flood sites has been neglected. This is the story of the Johnstown Flood Museum and the Johnstown Flood National Memorial.

WERE THEY LIABLE? COMPARING THE JOHNSTOWN FLOOD MUSEUM AND
THE JOHNSTOWN FLOOD NATIONAL MEMORIAL.

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By

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4.1 Dedication

For Frank.

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Introduction

“The Flood’s Over. Welcome to Johnstown.”

The Johnstown Galleria Mall proudly posts a sign depicting a man dressed from the knees down in old leather boots and high-water pants. Advertisements like this can be found all over Johnstown, a town that the locals refer to as “Flood City.” All the evidence of major floods has long disappeared, but the town will never forget.

Even though the people of Johnstown no longer live in fear of another flood, each past disaster defined an era of the town’s history. The stories of past floods are embedded in the collective memory of Johnstown.¹ Anyone who has grown up in the town has heard his or her relatives’ stories of the many floods. My grandparents spoke of the flood of 1936, and my parents of the flood of 1977. Such accounts fuel the importance of floods in the mass mind. Floods are what Johnstown is all about.

It seemed fitting that on the centennial of Johnstown’s most infamous flood, the Great Flood of 1889, the town would host commemorative events. The Johnstown Flood Museum, established in 1973, was renovated for the centennial. Because the historical event carried national significance, the National Park Service was also involved in the commemoration. On the site of the former Lake Conemaugh, the Johnstown Flood National Memorial was erected.

Since there were two sites devoted to the same topic, the Johnstown Flood Museum and the Johnstown Flood National Memorial, a unique relationship developed.

¹Howard Munson, *The Triumph of the American Spirit: Johnstown, Pennsylvania* (Lanham, Maryland: Johnstown Flood Museum and The American Association for State and Local History Library, 1989), 99.

The federal government passed legislation that allowed federal funding to trickle down from the National Park Service site to the local site. There is an inherent tie between the sites, but they remain independent of each other and have different objectives.

The cause of the flood is the most nagging issue on the minds of the people of Johnstown and its visitors. The South Fork Dam, located fourteen miles away and 450 feet above the city, was owned by the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. The membership roster included some of the wealthiest industrialists of the day. When the dam broke, over two thousand innocent people were killed. Because of this, the treatment of the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club is central to this study. The citizens of Johnstown tend to blame the club for the failure of the dam and for the flood that ensued. They feel that disaster could have been averted. On the other hand, it did rain a great deal the night before the dam broke. Perhaps the dam would have failed even if it had been maintained properly.

Blame is impossible to assess after all of these years. But the museums should not back away from the truth because it involves controversy. Examining the historians' consensus is important to understanding the flood. Each site chooses to interpret the flood by either accepting the consensus or challenging it. This gives visitors to both sites two ways of interpreting the disaster. If this were not so, there would be virtually no point in having two sites.

Examining the two flood sites, their methods of interpretation, and cooperative efforts, will conclude that having two sites devoted to the same subject is worthwhile. The flood sites allow visitors to form their own interpretations because they have options.

Perhaps without even realizing it, visitors are taught a lesson in the study of history. The stories of the past can be interpreted in many different ways.

The Johnstown Flood National Memorial and the Johnstown Flood Museum are representatives of the past and the future of the town. For years the townspeople tried to forget the Great Flood and move on with their lives. But the Museum and the Memorial were created for the town to remember. The flood was a tragedy, but it also highlighted the heroics and the spirit of the townspeople. And, if the town was lucky, the story would bring a few tourists to the area. These historic sites are using the event that nearly wiped the town off the map to bring it back to life.

Chapter 1 Cambria County Historical Society

The Settlement of Johnstown and the Flood of 1889

Deep in the forests of western Pennsylvania lies the valley of Conemaugh. To the east are the Allegheny Mountains. To the west is a river that cuts through the Chestnut Ridge. South of the valley is Laurel Hill. The valley is surrounded by steep elevations from 1,600 to 3,000 feet. Forests of cedar, pine, oak, cherry, poplar, and chestnut grow in the surrounding hills. The drainage system of the Cambria County is its most distinctive feature. In the south, the Stony Creek River empties its waters into the westbound streams. The other major stream is the Conemaugh, which originates from sources 2,300 feet above sea level in the Alleghenies.

In the early 1790s a Swiss immigrant named Joseph Schantz, otherwise Joseph Johns,¹ built a settlement. The charter for Johns' town, which he named Conemaugh, was drafted in 1800. Johns sold the town in 1807, and he and his family moved to a neighboring county. The charter for the town of Conemaugh passed through several hands until Peter Levergood bought it in 1818. The town grew tremendously under Levergood's ownership. It benefited from the opening of the canal era, the railroad, and

¹ Nathan Shappee, "A History of Johnstown and the Great Flood of 1889: A Study of Disaster and Rehabilitation" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1940), 23. His German name, Schantz, was used on deeds but Jantz was used in his family bible. "Only by mis-spellings and corruption of his...name did the present name of the town emerge from Schantz." In his deed for the town, Johnstown is used.

eventually the industrial revolution. In 1834 the Pennsylvania General Assembly renamed the town Johnstown, even though its residents had been calling it that for years.²

The town comprised many villages; of these the borough of Johnstown has only one-third of the total population. It sits at the fork of the Conemaugh and the Stony creeks. Johnstown and its boroughs sat so deep in the valley that a visitor from the midwest commented, "Your sun rises at 10 a.m. and sets at 2 p.m!"³ Johnstown is at the foot of three hills, which meet in a "V." The hills are several hundred feet high, and are so steep that the roads run "zig-zag" up them. The Little Conemaugh flows down one side of the "V" and the Stony Creek down the other. The two creeks meet to form the Conemaugh River and then run on to Pittsburgh.⁴

The Conemaugh River, at the western end, drains a 657-square-mile watershed, which falls into the rivers from mountains, 500 feet above it. The area is prone to frequent flooding because of its location in the valley. Floods occur when snow melts too quickly or when there is a heavy downpour. The nature of the riverbeds adds to the problem. The bottoms are stony and the currents are fast. But in the summer the water level drops so much that one could walk across the stones.⁵

In 1808, Johnstown recorded its first flood. After that the Little Conemaugh and the Stony Creek overflowed at least once every spring, and the townspeople became

² Michael McGough, *The 1889 Flood in Johnstown Pennsylvania* (Gettysburg, P.A.: Thomas Publications, 2002), 1-3.

³ Richard O'Connor, *Johnstown the Day the Dam Broke* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1957), 20.

⁴ Willis Fletcher Johnson, *History of the Johnstown Flood* (United States: Edgewood Publishing Co., 1889), 23.

⁵ "History of the Johnstown Flood," [data base online] (Johnstown Flood Museum); available from <http://www.jaha.org/FloodMuseum/history.html>; Internet; accessed 3 August 2005.

accustomed to moving everything to the second floor of their homes.⁶ Floods were recorded in 1808, 1816-1820, 1837, 1847, 1859, 1861, 1867, 1875, 1880, 1881, 1883, 1884, 1887, 1889, 1936, and 1977. One or more floods occurred in each of these years, with the latter three causing the most serious damage.⁷

Approximately 28,000 people lived in Johnstown in 1889. Three quarters of them worked for the Cambria Iron and Steel Company and lived in small tenement houses near the river, which ran along the works of the company.⁸ Cambria Iron and Steel Company was the country's major producer of railroad rails and the national leader in iron and steelmaking techniques. According to the *New York Times* it was the "finest iron works in the country and one of the glories of Pennsylvania industry." It rolled the first 30-foot steel rails in 1854 and was home to the first Bessemer converter in America, set up in 1861.⁹

Johnstown was a one-company town. The Cambria Company owned nearly all the land, and there was not a wealthy man in the town. Business, however, was done in town because all the stores were located in the borough of Johnstown. There were railroad shops, flourmills, a few banks, and newspapers.¹⁰ A man's social and financial position could be judged by the distance between his home and the river flats.¹¹

The Cambria Company operated about thirty-five miles of railroad tracks, twenty-four locomotives, and fifteen hundred cars. It owned seven hundred houses that were

⁶ O'Connor, *Johnstown*, 14.

⁷ McGough, *1889 Flood*, 40.

⁸ Johnson, *History*, 17.

⁹ Muson, *American Spirit*, 12.

¹⁰ Johnson, *History*, 17, 18, 21, 24.

¹¹ O'Connor, *Johnstown*, 16.

rented by its employees. The company built a woolen mill to provide jobs for the daughters and widows of employees. It also erected an opera house, a library, and a clubhouse to entertain the workers, and a hospital for their well-being.¹²

Fifteen to twenty miles up the Conemaugh creek sat Lake Conemaugh, part of the old Conemaugh canal system. The lake was three to four hundred feet above the streets of Johnstown. Originally, it was a small natural lake. It was put to use to supply the state's western canal system.

The canal that ran from Johnstown to Pittsburgh was the Western Division of the state's "Main Line." It was built to compete with the Erie Canal system. But every summer the canal ran dry. A dam was constructed to maintain a steady water supply for the canal system. Work on the dam began in 1838. Sylvester Welsh, the head engineer, had 400 acres of timber cleared, proposing a dam 850 feet in length with spillways at each end. The state's engineer, William E. Morris, agreed with Welsh's estimates.¹³

The dam was finished in 1852 with nearly \$240,000 spent over the state's original appropriation of \$30,000. It was an earthen dam, a form of construction that had been the accepted to hold water for thousands of years. Because such a dam is susceptible to erosion, the water must never go over the top and leaks must be tended to. Spillways were cut through the rock on each side of the hillside, which was 72 feet wide. Five cast iron pipes were placed into a stone culvert in the center of the dam. The pipes could

¹² James Herbert Walker, *The Johnstown Horror or Valley of Death* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1889), 162.

¹³ David McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 50.

release overflow into the Little Conemaugh when necessary. A wooden tower that sat nearby could control the pipes.¹⁴

About the time the dam was finished, the Pennsylvania Railroad completed its route along the same path as the canal, from Johnstown to Pittsburgh. The Horseshoe Curve was completed and the canal system was put out of business. Two years after the dam was finished, it was obsolete.¹⁵

The dam passed through a series of owners and suffered continuous neglect. The state's "Main Line" was to sell for \$10 million in 1854. Three years later the Pennsylvania Railroad bought it for \$7.5 million. From 1857 through 1879 the railroad did nothing to maintain the dam. The first break occurred in 1862. The lake behind the dam was half full, as were the rivers, and the watchman was able to release much of the pressure by opening the valves. At one point, the original wooden control tower caught fire and burned to the ground. The damage from this flood was minimal. After this break, the lake was ten feet deep at the most. At the southern end it was completely dry.

In 1875 the dam was sold to Congressman John Reilly, who held onto the property for four years in the hope of making a profit. He sold the cast iron pipes for scrap before accepting an offer from the next buyer, Benjamin Ruff. Ruff originally had planned to rebuild the dam to a height of 40 feet and cut the spillways down to 20 feet high. When he found out how much this would cost, he hastily returned the dam to its original height and attempted to repair the damage from the break.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, J. Edgar Thomas, then chief engineer for the Pennsylvania Railroad, created a daring route over the mountains, which included the famous Horseshoe Curve.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 52, 53, 55.

In 1879 Ruff organized the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club around Lake Conemaugh by selling shares to wealthy Pittsburghers. Among the contributors and members were Henry Clay Frick, Andrew Carnegie, Andrew Mellon, Philander Knox, and Robert Pitcairn. The organization, its name, and its members were kept secret from the town of Johnstown. The charter was “secured without the knowledge of the authorities in Cambria County.”¹⁷

There was no body of water like Lake Conemaugh in Pittsburgh. The mills polluted the air along with the Monongahela and the Allegheny Rivers. The idea of a summer resort was new to the area. The first person to take an interest in the idea was Andrew Carnegie. In 1881 he had built a home in Cresson, Pennsylvania on land that had been cleared by the Pennsylvania Railroad. Carnegie had not been living in Pittsburgh for quite some time. He spent most of his time in New York, Scotland, or Cresson.

But Carnegie saw many drawbacks to his summer spot in Cresson. It was a public place and sat right next to the railroad. It also had no water, which made the trendy sports of boating and fishing impossible. The reservoir at South Fork provided the perfect solution. It was set back in the woods, away from the railroad, and it had one of the best trout streams in the state.¹⁸

The South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club was organized with the purpose of providing its members and their families an opportunity to get away from the bustle of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49. This would later be interpreted as “evidence that they had no desire for anyone to come looking into their business in general.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43-48.

Pittsburgh. It boasted a 47-room clubhouse, including a dining room that could seat 150. Sixteen privately owned "cottages" sat along the shore of the lake. The club's boat fleet included a pair of steam yachts, several sailboats and canoes, and boathouses to store them. Entertainment included an annual regatta, theatricals and musical performances.¹⁹

The people of Johnstown were not excited about such personages frequenting South Fork. The club made it known that despite the wealth of its members, they had no intention of repairing the dam. In fact, "they regarded the dam as someone else's responsibility." Although they had bought the dam they felt no obligation to repair what had been built years before by the state. They were more concerned with their bass and pickerel than the safety of the dam.²⁰

The Club made many alterations to the dam that threatened those below and set the stage for a great disaster.²¹ Workers used every type of rubbish imaginable as material to repair the dam, and the discharge pipes were not replaced.²² Edward Pearson, who was not an engineer, was hired to repair the dam for the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club.

People wondered and asked why the dam was not strengthened, as it certainly had become weak, but nothing was done, and by and by they talked less and less about it as nothing happened, though now and then some would shake their heads as though conscious that the fearful day would come....²³

¹⁹ "The South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club and the South Fork Dam," [data base on line] (Johnstown Flood Museum); available from <http://www.jaha.org/FloodMuseum/clubanddam.html>; Internet; accessed 3 August 2005.

²⁰ O'Connor, *Johnstown*, 37.

²¹ Johnson, *History*, 32. They increased the size of the dam to nearly 100 feet, and 3 miles in length.

²² *Ibid.*, 55-56. "...local rock, mud, brush, hemlock boughs, hay,...even horse manure was used in some quantity."

²³ Walker, *Johnstown Horror*, 47.

If the dam ever collapsed and flooded the valley, Cambria Iron would be the heaviest sufferer. The company had invested \$50,000,000 in Johnstown. J.D. Morrell, the president of the Cambria Company, was leery of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, so he decided to set aside company funds to purchase two shares in the club. The company also employed its engineer, John Fulton, to inspect the lake and the dam. His findings were less than favorable toward the club. Morrell sent a copy of Fulton's report to Benjamin Ruff. Ruff replied to the report, "you and your people are in no danger from our enterprise."

But Morrell was persistent:

If this dam could be securely reconstructed with a safe means of driving off the water in case any weakness manifests itself, I should regard the accomplishment of this work a very desirable one, and if some arrangement could be made with your association...this company would be willing to cooperate with you in the work and contribute liberally toward making the dam absolutely safe.

The South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club did not want outsiders invading its privacy, no matter how politely assistance was proposed.

People who lived near the dam also raised concern. A Cambria County mine owner who had property near the dam requested that his own engineer inspect the dam. He went to the sheriff to ask for an injunction against the club. But instead of going to court the sheriff he went to the Cambria Company, and the matter was dropped.²⁴

On the May 30, 1889, the townspeople were participating in Memorial Day activities when it began to rain. The people of Johnstown were accustomed to rain. The Little Conemaugh's and the Stony Creek's waters were turbulent and on the rise. The

²⁴ O'Connor, *Johnstown*, 38-41.

townspeople made their way indoors, thinking nothing of the heavy downpour, and went to sleep that night wondering how high the waters would rise this time.

All was quiet a few miles up the hill at Lake Conemaugh. It was too early in the year for summer groups and too late for hunting. The cabins were empty and the boats were secured to the docks. The president of the club, Colonel Elias. J. Unger, the superintendent of the grounds, W. Y. Boyer, and the newly appointed resident engineer, John G. Parke, sat in the clubhouse near the site of the dam and discussed the heavy rainfall. There were seventy-five workmen outside fixing the cabins for indoor plumbing, even though they should have been fixing the leaks in the dam.

Unger, Boyer, and Parke were reluctant to admit apprehension to one another. But Herbert Webber, who had been employed as a guard and caretaker of the cottages, was obsessed with the condition of the dam. He recalled warning the club members and faculty about the state of the dam. But they became tired of his warnings and told him to "Shut up or you'll be bounced."²⁵

The next morning the townspeople ascended to the second floors of their homes and waited for the waters to recede. The people had heard rumors of the dam breaking for years, and it had never happened. They had no reason to believe that this time was any different. In addition, they found some comfort in the fact that the Cambria Iron Works and the Pennsylvania Railroad owned the majority of the property in the valley. It was presumed that they had engineers who were keeping a watch on the activities of the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 43-45

South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. Many people in Johnstown assumed that the rich club members were taking precautions to keep the dam safe.²⁶

The storm was the worst downpour ever recorded in western Pennsylvania.²⁷ The rain had originated in the west, somewhere in the Rockies. It began to move east through Kansas and Nebraska, then the Ohio River Valley on May 28. It divided into two low-pressure fronts, one headed for New England and one over the Alleghenies. On May 30, six to eight inches of rain fell on a 12,000-square-foot area of western Pennsylvania. The estimated rainfall on the area from the Alleghenies' watershed was 4,320,000,000 tons. For more than six weeks, western Pennsylvania had been hit with various forms of precipitation. All of this storm water drained into the Susquehanna and the Potomac, and flooded their banks. The tributaries to these rivers were in worse condition.²⁸

On the morning of the 31st, the residents of Johnstown found the lower end of the town under water. Work was halted at the lower works at 7 am and at 10 am the Gautier Plant closed. By noon the townspeople were shut in by the rising water.²⁹

Colonel Unger awoke on the morning of the 31st to the sound of rain drumming on his roof. The water in the lake had risen two feet over night and there was no sign of the rain letting up. He knew his responsibility. It was too late to confer with the members of the club, but if he ordered the grates on the spillways removed, he would look like a fool if the rain stopped suddenly. He risked ruining the summer's fishing by taking such an emergency measure.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

²⁷ McCullough, *Johnstown Flood*, 21.

²⁸ O'Connor, *Johnstown*, 11-12.

²⁹ Shappee, *Great Flood*, 247.

By the time Unger decided to remove the grates on the spillways they were so jammed with debris that they would not budge.³⁰ The workers at Lake Conemaugh attempted to add height to the dam, then to dig a second spillway to relieve pressure, but their efforts were futile.³¹ While Unger and his workers tried to make hasty repairs to the dam, Parke rode his horse to South Fork to warn the people. On the way back he noticed water flowing over the top of the dam and through crevices on the outer surface.³²

By 3:00 p.m. on May 31, 1889, Johnstown was experiencing the worst flood in its history. The shores of the Little Conemaugh and the Stony Creek had reached the streets, with some water levels rising eight to ten feet. The only way people could evacuate the city now was by boat, and many did. But the majority of the townspeople decided to wait it out, as they were accustomed to doing.³³

At 3:10 p.m., the center of the dam failed. The waters headed down the valley toward Johnstown. The lake emptied in forty-five minutes.³⁴ Twenty million tons of water flowed into the valley and made its way toward Johnstown, 450 feet below.³⁵ The path of the flood was as follows: South Fork, Mineral Point, East Conemaugh, Woodvale, Millville, then Johnstown.³⁶

³⁰ O'Connor, *Johnstown*, 74-76.

³¹ "History of the Johnstown Flood," [data base on line] (Johnstown Flood Museum); available from <http://www.jaha.org/FloodMuseum/history.html>; Internet; accessed 3 August 2005.

³² Shappee, *Great Flood*, 246.

³³ McGough, *The 1889 Flood*, 58.

³⁴ O'Connor, *Johnstown*, 80-81.

³⁵ McCullough, *Johnstown Flood*, 41.

³⁶ McGough, *1889 Flood*, 60.

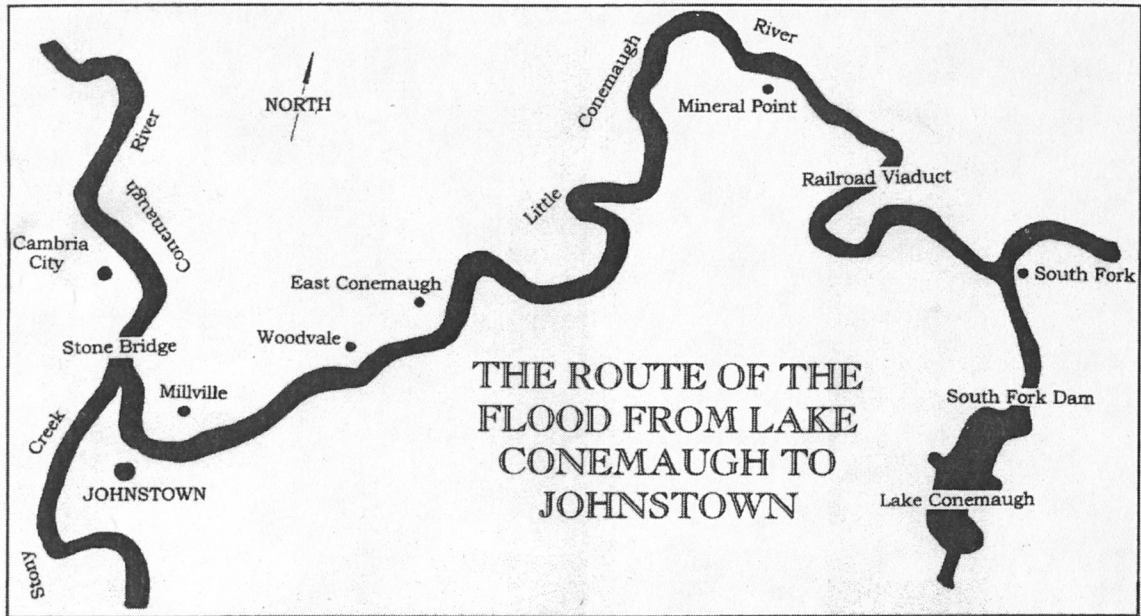


Figure 1. Route of the flood

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There were no houses at South Fork, but the flood waters tore out the railroad ties, twisted the steel rails into strange shapes, and carried away whatever equipment was there. From South Fork, the valley narrowed and floodwaters squeezed through, rising to a height of 75 feet. The water traveled through a horseshoe curve, then smashed into the 75-foot high stone viaduct over the Little Conemaugh. The viaduct held momentarily, creating a second dam. When it collapsed, the floodwater exploded down the valley with greater force than when the dam broke at South Fork.

Mineral Point contained about thirty houses in a row along the north side of the river. There was a sawmill and a furniture factory. When the flood came “the town was simply shaved off, right down to the bare rock.”³⁸ It looked as though no town had ever

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁸ McCullough, *Johnstown Flood*, 111.

been there at all. Luckily most people had already moved to high ground because of the rising waters. Sixteen people were dead.³⁹

East Conemaugh was next to be hit by the floodwaters. John Hess was sitting inside his work train on the track nearest the hillside. He had been sent there with a work crew to help clear a mudslide. On their way toward South Fork, they came upon a flagman who told them that it was not safe to proceed. The conductor heard the flood coming and told the workmen to run. Hess knew that the dam had broken, so he tied down the whistle of his locomotive and hurried down the valley toward East Conemaugh. He had intended to continue the whole way to Johnstown, but the track was not clear. Hess stopped the train after about two minutes, left the whistle tied down, and ran for the hills. This was the only warning East Conemaugh had.

The Day Express had also been halted at East Conemaugh. The passenger train was stuck between Johnstown and East Conemaugh because of the wash outs on the tracks. The last cars were situated next to a telegraph tower, and had been receiving warnings that the dam might go. No one paid much attention to the warnings. The yardmaster did not want to evacuate the people from the trains because there was no shelter for them and it was cold and rainy outside. At about 3:45 the yardmaster heard Hess's whistle blow. He yelled for everyone to evacuate the train and headed for high ground. Not everyone made it out in time. Twenty-two were killed on the Day Express,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 107-111.

but the mail car in section two of the locomotive was virtually untouched. In East Conemaugh and Franklin, the dead totaled twenty-eight.⁴⁰

After the destruction at East Conemaugh, the floodwater was carrying a sixteen-stall roundhouse, machine shops, engines, boxcars, and approximately 150 houses. West of East Conemaugh was Woodvale. Every house in the town was torn down by the flood and debris. The flour mill and three-fourths of the woolen mill were destroyed.⁴¹

The floodwater was on a downward rush into the valley, accumulating additional force on its path toward Johnstown. The water was rolling over itself because the debris that had collected caused friction and slowed the bottom of the wave down and caused the top to travel out in front.⁴²

The general estimated time of the flood's arrival in Johnstown was 4:07 p.m. The water was approximately thirty-six feet high at the center. Most people never saw the water coming. They heard what "began as a deep, steady rumble...then it grew louder and louder until it became an avalanche of sound." They heard screaming, buildings crashing against each other, glass shattering, and they saw the "death mist," which was probably caused by the explosion at the Gautier works upstream.⁴³

The floodwater parted as it entered Johnstown. The main wave followed the path of the Stony Creek to the west until it hit Westmont Hill and the stone bridge. This wave of the flood carried the greatest force. The stone railroad bridge held the waters for

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 112-115, 117-122.

⁴¹ Shappee, *Great Flood*, 263.

⁴² McGough, *1889 Flood*, 64.

⁴³ McCullough, *Johnstown Flood*, 145-147.

twenty minutes. By this time Johnstown was destroyed.⁴⁴ The city was submerged under another Lake Conemaugh, with depths reaching thirty feet.⁴⁵ The stone bridge held back wreckage that covered thirty acres. The debris eventually stood 15 feet higher than the bridge. The debris caught fire at dusk and burned for three days. Two weeks later 70 charred bodies were found.⁴⁶

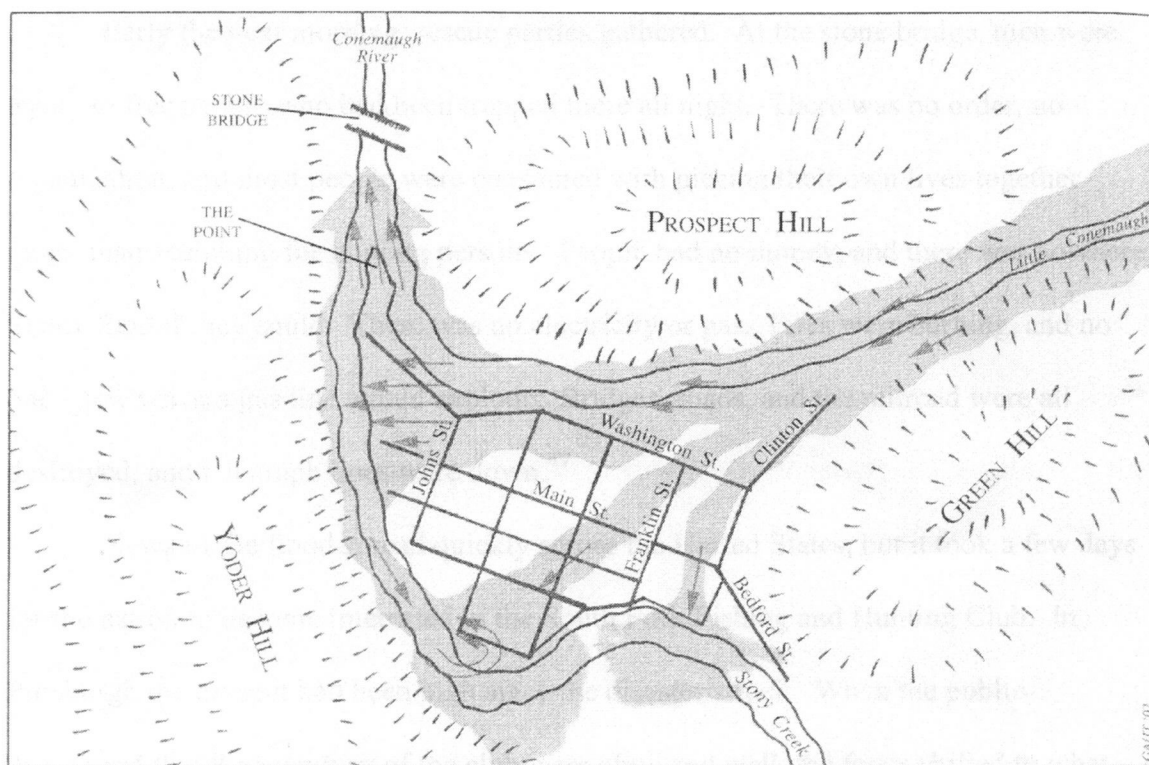


Figure 2. Flood wave hits Johnstown

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By 4:30 the water levels began to recede slowly into the valley below Johnstown. When darkness fell, the only light to be seen in Johnstown was the blaze at the stone bridge. Those who had survived began a desperate struggle to find loved ones, while not becoming victims themselves. Ninety-nine entire families were lost, as well as 396

⁴⁴ Shappee, *Great Flood*, 264-266.

⁴⁵ McGough, *1889 Flood*, 66.

⁴⁶ Shappee, *Great Flood*, 275-277.

⁴⁷ McGough, *1889 Flood*, 66.

children under the age of ten. The number of men widowed totaled 198, and 124 women lost their husbands. A total of 2,209 people were killed. Food, clothing, medical supplies, and clean water were unavailable. Several buildings were, however turned into shelters and gathering places. Safety measures were the most immediate concern. No fires could be lit for fear of gas leaks and alcohol was confiscated for medical purposes.⁴⁸

Early the next morning, rescue parties gathered. At the stone bridge, men were trying to free people who had been trapped there all night. There was no order, no organization, and most people were consumed with piecing their own lives together rather than searching for missing persons. People had no money, and there was nowhere to buy food if they could. There was no electricity or gas. Fires were burning, and no one knew when a gas line would explode. Bridges, roads, and the railroad were all destroyed, and telegraph lines were down.⁴⁹

News of the flood spread quickly across the United States, but it took a few days for the nation to become interested in the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. In Pittsburgh the interest had been high since the disaster struck. When the public discovered that the members of the club were alive and well, the focus shifted to what they might do next.

With pressure from the press mounting, the club members decided to hold a meeting. Pitcairn, Frick, and Phipps were named to serve on the executive board of the Relief Committee. They said nothing about the flood, but decided to make an immediate

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 68-69, 79.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

donation of 1000 blankets. But, to the dismay of the Relief Committee, a few members did decide to speak on the matter.

George McGregor said that he “refused to believe that there had been any trouble at South Fork.” He believed the whole thing was a mistake. Another member, who would not disclose his name, said that he remembered hearing questions about the strength of the dam but he never looked into the matter. Louis Clarke actually said that there was “great doubt among engineers” that it was in fact the South Fork Dam that had broken.⁵⁰

In response to Clarke’s outlandish remarks, several reporters made their way to the broken South Fork Dam and began to compile a history of the structure that did not place the members of the club in a good light. The few members who had been on site when the dam broke fled so quickly back to Pittsburgh that they only made matters worse for themselves. If they had stayed in Johnstown to help with the relief effort, locals might not have been as hostile or suspicious.

When the press detailed the way Ruff had rebuilt the dam, the citizens of Johnstown began to remember some of the suspicious dealings that the club members had conducted in the city. Farmers remembered selling hay to Ruff to patch leaks in the dam, leading citizens had complained to city officials about the safety of the dam, and some recalled their children being chased from the grounds. The press was told about the guards on the spillways, the alterations the club had made to height of the dam, and the failure to replace the release pipes. No one who was interviewed had anything good to

⁵⁰ McCullough, *Johnstown Flood*, 241-243.

say about the club or its members. The club was not only condemned by the public and the press, but also by coroners' juries, General Hastings, and engineering experts.

Reporters predicted lawsuits.⁵¹

Various lawsuits were in fact filed. Local businessmen gathered money to hire the best lawyers money could buy. Ruff had been dead for years, so personal negligence on his part was ruled out. In one case, the club kept seeking a change of venue because of local feelings. The case sat for years in one county court after another. There were also suits against the Pennsylvania Railroad, but all of the trials were held in Pittsburgh instead of Johnstown. The odds were against Johnstown. The club members were simply too powerful and influential. Their lawyers referred to the disaster an "act of God."⁵²

Neither the press nor the public was pleased with the knowledge that the contributions from Frick, Mellon, and Carnegie totaled only \$7,000.

No cent was ever levied against the club or its members for the lives lost and the property destroyed. Nor could the state of Pennsylvania proceed against the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club without involving possibly itself as a co-defendant; for the state had not only built the dam but allowed for its existence after it was proven faulty and did not require any of the subsequent owners adequately to correct those faults.⁵³

Carnegie did, however, agree to pay for a new library in the exact place where the leveled Cambria Library had stood. The building was completed on February 19, 1892.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 243-244, 248; Daniel Hartman Hastings was the adjunct general of the Pennsylvania National Guard. He swiftly responded to the flood, accessed the greatest need, and telegraphed the governor of Pennsylvania for tents and medical supplies. This made quite an impression on the citizens of Pennsylvania. He went on to become the governor in 1895. "Pennsylvania Governors Past to Present," [data base online] (Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission) available from <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/governors/hastings.asp?secid=31>; Internet; accessed 3 June 2006.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 258-260.

⁵³ O'Connor, *Johnstown*, 235.

The library boasted 8,000 new volumes, furnished reading rooms, an auditorium, and a gymnasium on the third floor, which included exercise equipment, and a running track padded with leather.

The citizens of Johnstown were generally enthusiastic over this donation, but there was at least one exception: John Fulton, the head of the Cambria Library Association Board of Directors. He wrote, "Nov.23, meeting. Andy Carnegie to pay for new building. A great bronze plate on the front to record the work of this fortunate egoist."⁵⁴

The mills were operational again in one month and Johnstown became more prosperous than ever. The disaster had in fact strengthened the community. Rebuilding the town gave members of the community a new sense of hope that would carry over into the future. Later generations learned from the events of 1889.⁵⁵

The Johnstown Flood happened at a time when federal relief programs did not exist. Yet recovery was achieved through "one of the greatest private charity campaigns ever mounted. The American Red Cross, only recently founded, won recognition as a national disaster relief agency for its work in Johnstown."⁵⁶ Clara Barton was 67 years old when she came to Johnstown to distribute supplies and help with rehabilitation. The flood established her American Red Cross as the pre-eminent disaster relief agency of the

⁵⁴ McGough, *1889 Flood*, 115-116. This donation is of particular historical importance to Johnstown because it would eventually house The Johnstown Flood Museum.

⁵⁵ Munson, *American Spirit*, 114

⁵⁶ Donald Dale Jackson, "When 20 million tons of water flooded Johnstown," *Smithsonian*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1989), 52.

United States. A total of nearly \$4 million was collected for the Johnstown Relief Fund from every state and 14 countries.⁵⁷

The aftermath of the flood is an inspirational period in American social history. The country was experiencing a mass communication revolution that included railroads, telegraphs, and newspapers.⁵⁸ The Johnstown Flood occurred during the period of the “information era” and it thrust “the media into a frenzy of coverage...forever defining the way that disasters would be reported.” The number of daily newspapers printed between the time of the Civil War and the turn of the century quadrupled. By the year 1900 there were actually 400 more circulations than there are today.⁵⁹

As soon as journalists could get to the scene, they began reporting the devastation. Journalists tried to estimate the severity, the impact on the town, the relief effort, and most important, how the disaster happened. Was it a natural or a man-made disaster? Johnstown easily fits into the history of the nation, for the nation is made of towns just like this. The treatment of this town by wealthy businessmen was similar to what other small towns might soon face.

One of the flood’s foremost historians, David McCullough, commented on Johnstown’s place in the American landscape:

For everyone who had been asking how such a calamity could possibly happen in the United States of America, there now appeared to be an answer, and it struck at the core of something which had been eating at the people for some time, something most of them had as yet no name for, but something deeply disturbing. For despite the progress being made everywhere...there were in 1889 strong feelings that perhaps not all was right with the Republic. Was it not the likes of

⁵⁷ McGough, *1889 Flood*, 108.

⁵⁸ Munson, *American Spirit*, 106.

⁵⁹ Ray B. Browne and Arthur G. Neal, *Ordinary Reactions to Extraordinary Events* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2001), 150-151.

them [gentlemen of South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club] that were bringing in the hunkies, buying legislatures, cutting wages, and getting a great deal richer than was right or good for any mortal man in a free, democratic country?

...It would be another several years...before public indignation over the power of the trusts, the giant corporations, and the men who ran them would erupt into real public outrage. But the feeling was there in 1889, and it ran a great deal deeper than most people would have supposed.⁶⁰

The city of Johnstown was well aware that the power of a few wealthy men could affect the livelihood of their town. "50,000 lives in Pennsylvania were jeopardized for eight years that a club of rich pleasure-seekers might fish and sail and revel in luxurious ease during the heated term." With the deaths of loved ones and the loss of homes and businesses uncompensated, the townspeople remained bitter for years.⁶¹

⁶⁰ McCullough, *Johnstown Flood*, 248-249.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Chapter 2

Historians' Interpretation

Both the Johnstown Flood Museum and the Johnstown Flood Memorial are responsible for interpreting the flood in an ethical and professional manner. Even so, there are bound to be differences in the two presentations of the flood. In order to analyze each museum, it is useful to discuss the historiography of the Johnstown Flood. Then each museum's interpretation can be compared with those of the subject's foremost historians.

The aspects that have attracted historians to the story of the Johnstown Flood differ, and what conclusions they have made over the years are debatable. The most controversial aspect of this story concerns "the men on the hill." Some historians do not blame them, concluding that the event was inevitable. Others clearly see a connection.

Examining historical sources on the flood will give insight into the consensus regarding the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club's liability. We will then be able to see how each museum adheres to historical documents when it tells its version of the story. Visitors to the Johnstown Flood sites should walk away with the facts that led to the break, so that they may reach their own conclusions on the question of liability.

The various contributions to the dam's condition up to 1889 make it difficult to assess blame. The state, the Pennsylvania Railroad, Congressman Reilly, and Benjamin Ruff, founder and president of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, all had owned the dam at one point before the flood. But the fact remains that the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club owned the dam when it broke and the club's alterations to the dam

were the most extreme. Thus, they have provided historians a focal point for the study of the flood. Each historian presents a slightly different interpretation of the club.

Historical accounts have appeared from the year of the flood to the present day. Professional historians, journalists, and general onlookers have contributed to the literature, but many are not noteworthy sources. Those who seem at fault for the disaster never came forward. It is therefore hard for historians, and more importantly the people of Johnstown, to fully comprehend this event when so many questions remain unanswered. Accounts of the flood grapple with these unanswered questions.

In the months following the flood popular writers produced a few publications that have survived today. Two examples are Willis Fletcher Johnson and Herman Dieck. Their works are significant for their “shock appeal” and personal accounts. But much of the information in them is exaggerated and must be read with caution. Someone not familiar with the story of the flood may find it difficult to separate facts from myths.

Johnson and Dieck had a difficult task in some ways, because many resources were not yet available. Yet, they did present a contemporary perspective on the flood’s effect on their generation. They were able to write about the events so soon after their occurrence that they could readily use all of the primary resources of the day. Not surprisingly, neither author presented footnotes or any bibliography.

Johnson’s book was entitled *The Johnstown Flood*. He began his story by describing the background on the city of Johnstown and the dam. He devoted two chapters to these topics and then gave a graphic account of the breaking of the dam and

the devastation that ensued. He wrote the whole account in dramatic, Victorian-period style.

Johnson's account of the background of Johnstown was vague at times, and although he focused on the Cambria Company and the geographic location of the town, he failed to show their relevance to the story. He also only briefly discussed the ownership of the dam and the negligence it suffered over the years. Either the evidence was not readily available to Johnson so soon after the event, or he did not do the necessary research.

Johnson treated the owners of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club kindly. He did not present their actions in repairing the dam as faulty or negligent. He relied on a personal story for the history of the dam. Johnson interviewed J.B. Montgomery, a former resident of western Pennsylvania, and according to Johnson, one of the engineers who inspected the dam at the time the Pennsylvania Railroad owned it. He gave his "impression" of the "construction and history of the Conemaugh Lake dam," which suggested that the dam was originally built with "stone and wood throughout, and was of particularly solid construction."¹

Johnson's account did not mention that the dam broke under the ownership of the Pennsylvania Railroad and that the release tower burned down. He also did not mention the next owner, Congressman Reilly, or his treatment of the dam before selling it to Ruff.² Montgomery claimed that he heard that the waste gates for the dam were never

¹ Willis Fletcher Johnson, *History of the Johnstown Flood*, (N.P.: Edgewood Publishing Co., 1889), 36-39. This conflicts with later accounts of the dam being built with layers of clay and rock.

² *Ibid.*, 40.

opened to let out excess water because the Pittsburghers did not want their expensive fish to escape. Montgomery suggested that “the explanation of the bursting of the dam is to be found right here.” He thought the dam was in perfectly safe condition as long as the water did not flow over the top.³

According to Johnson, the people of Johnstown were afraid the dam would break, and they wondered why it had not been strengthened. The principal complainer about the dam was Daniel Morrell, the owner of the Cambria County Mine. Despite his protests to the sheriff that the Pittsburghers were using straw to stop the leaks, action was not taken against them.⁴

Johnson referred to the idea that the dam would break some day as a rumor that existed among the townspeople.

It was the old classic story of “Wolf, wolf.” They gave up the first floors to the water and retired upstairs to wait until the river should recede, as they had done often before, scouting the oft-told story of the breaking of the reservoir.⁵

Johnson suggested that the people of Johnstown were warned and given sufficient time to head for the hills, but the warning was disregarded. Those who did leave town were “looked upon as cowards.” Even after the Stony Creek dam had broken hours earlier, the townspeople were not phased.⁶

Johnson presented detail on the failure of the dam in only six chapters (65 pages out of the total of 459), and devoted the majority of his book to the aftermath and the relief of flood victims. His conclusions about the event itself were rather sketchy. For

³ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33-35. An employee was sent there to make an inspection, but his report was favorable to the owners of the club. The sheriff did not take the case any further.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

this reason, it is difficult to rely on such a book. Much of Johnson's story of the flood was just that: a story. Yet the majority of those who succeeded him in writing about the flood have cited his text frequently.

Another author who wrote immediately following the flood was Herman Dieck. His book was also entitled *The Johnstown Flood*. There is no publication date, but it clearly appeared soon after the flood. Dieck's text was comparable to Johnson's, but he gave a much more thorough account and presented the material in a seemingly scholarly manner. He stated that his book

will give to the reader a true and interesting narrative of this terrible calamity gathered from the best sources, and is richly illustrated, the views being taken on the spot by the special artists of the publishers.⁷

Dieck began by stressing the uniqueness of the event. It was the largest catastrophe in the peacetime history of the United States. Lake Conemaugh held more water than any other reservoir in the United States.⁸ He also pointed out the importance of Johnstown's location in the disaster: "a town built in a basin of the mountains" surrounded by streams. He noted Johnstown's industrial importance in the production of Bessemer Steel.⁹

Unlike Johnson, Dieck had no problem finding sources to prove the negligence of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. He did not mention names but called them "wealthy gentlemen of Pittsburg [*sic*]." Among his sources were A.M. Wellington and

⁷ Herman Dieck, *The Johnstown Flood* (Philadelphia), 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 25-27. This was an exaggeration. There were several reservoirs in the United States that held more water than Lake Conemaugh as cited in Michael McGough's *The 1889 Flood in Johnstown Pennsylvania*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

L.P. Burt of the New York *Engineering News*. The New York *Evening World* verified their reports. Wellington reported:

No engineer of known good standing could possibly have been engaged in the reconstruction of the old dam after it had been neglected for twenty odd years, and the old dam was a very inferior piece of work, and of a kind wholly unwarranted by good engineering practices of its day, thirty years ago....Ignorance or carelessness is shown in the reconstruction, for the middle of the new dam was nearly two feet lower in the middle than at the ends.¹⁰

Wellington went on to complain of the inferior spillways that were contracted to prevent fish from escaping down stream, the closing of the discharge pipe, and the screwing down of the safety valve.¹¹ He was not alone in making such assertions. George Elder, a student from the University of Pennsylvania, had submitted the hypothetical problem of the dam breaking beforehand, as had the owner of the Cambria mines, D.J. Morrell.¹²

Dieck discussed how the members of the club were soon declaring that the event was a thing of the past; they did not feel it worthwhile to discuss. It had happened only months before! The Pittsburghers did not admit that they were members, and they denied any interest in the club whatsoever. Dieck concluded that “they are waiting legal action which will probably be taken against them.”¹³ In the years that followed the flood, lawsuits were taken up against some of the shareholders, but they were never held accountable.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27-29.

¹¹ Note that the discharge pipes had been scraped prior the club gaining ownership.

¹² *Ibid.*, 30. Morrell is also mentioned in Johnson’s text. Dieck goes on to include Morrell’s membership in the club. “The president of [my] Company...” was suspicious and thought “that it would be a good idea to have some member of the Company inside the South Fork Fishing Club.”

¹³ *Ibid.*, 31.

The high point of Dieck's text was that he acknowledged the dangers of relying on eyewitness accounts.

The correspondents, who were dispatched to the Conemaugh Valley, as soon as the terrible disaster horrified the public, found it impossible to gather a clear and intelligible description of the catastrophe from eye witnesses...By the terrible flood the communications by rail and wire were nearly all cut off and many citizens, who on Saturday, June 1st read about the disaster first believed that the reports...were greatly exaggerated.

Dieck claimed that this was not the case. He felt that the reports of the destruction were accurate and justified by numerous charitable organizations. The first estimate of lives lost ranged from 10,000 to 12,000. These numbers assumed that those who were missing were dead. Dieck realized that the exact number of casualties might never be known; bodies were found beyond Pittsburgh. After the facts had been sifted out, the situation was far worse than first accounts had portrayed.¹⁴

Dieck, like Johnson, focused on the aftermath. Not much information was obtainable immediately after the event. For example, Johnson and Dieck failed to mention that Morrell had died in 1885, four years before the dam broke, and that Ruff had died in 1887.¹⁵ The rehabilitation was much easier to report on because the events could be recorded as they took place. Both authors wrote that the rehabilitation was still going on, and their stories reflect this.

Many years went by before any more substantial writings on the Johnstown Flood appeared. Many books were directed toward a juvenile audience or went out of print soon after they were published. Historians did not feel the need to revisit the subject

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34-35. For example, the loss of property was first estimated to be between 25 and 30 million dollars. It was later estimated to be double that amount.

¹⁵ David McCullough, "Run For Your Lives!," *American Heritage*, Vol. 17, No. 4, (1966), 10.

because of the lack of public interest, or perhaps because they felt the topic had already been fully covered. After a few decades, the only Americans who took an interest in the flood were the residents of Johnstown. And even Johnstown was trying to move on.

In 1940, a student of the University of Pittsburgh decided to visit the topic for his doctoral dissertation. Nathan Shappee wrote “A History of Johnstown and the Great Flood of 1889: A Study of Disaster and Rehabilitation.” This work was well researched and contained detailed footnotes. It was never published but is frequently referred to in later works on the early history of Johnstown and the 1889 Flood.

Shappee begins his story with a background on Johnstown and the Cambria Company. He spends 189 out of 630 pages on history. He stated that

the history of Johnstown offers an unparalleled opportunity for the study of industrial and social history. For some strange reason, a detailed account of its development has escaped the attention of serious historians.¹⁶

Shappee’s introduction is thought provoking. He pointed out that from 1867 to 1889 Johnstown’s industries boomed, yet the town was careless with their success. Johnstown was representative of America as a whole during this period.

In the wake of the disaster, the failures of this rapid industrialization were shown in the pathetic misery that the people, not the mills, suffered. The shortsightedness of American industrial development after the Civil War is epitomized in Johnstown, and laid bare by the flood.¹⁷

The introduction gives the sense that Shappee did not blame anyone for the disaster. He saw the event as an inevitable consequence of the actions committed by all.

¹⁶ Nathan Shappee, “A History of Johnstown and the Great Flood of 1889: A Study of Disaster and Rehabilitation,” (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1940), I.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I-II.

He then went on to give a background on the South Fork Dam before its break in 1889, but not before he mentioned the carelessness of the townspeople. Unlike other flood historians, Shappee did not shy away from the less than favorable conditions in the city. In chapter five, “Encroachment in the Conemaugh Valley; Prelude to Disaster,” he discussed both the “encroachment on the rivers” that was occurring in the city, as well as the “encroachment in the mountain streams; the South Fork Reservoir.”¹⁸

Shappee pointed out the valley was too small for the population and industries of Johnstown. The mountains could certainly not be moved, so the rivers were encroached upon. River beds were filled in to allow for growth and were used as garbage dumps for citizens and industries alike. Individuals were also building their own river walls.¹⁹

Shappee discussed the background on the conditions of the South Fork Dam, and he missed few details. Overall, Shappee did not seem to blame the club, but he did point out its mistakes in repairing the dam. Regarding the overseers of the club’s repairs, Shappee noted “to this day, the club stands condemned for this act and the whole misery of the flood traced to this practice.”²⁰

Shappee made full use of Fulton’s engineering report, which pointed out the flaws in the reconstruction of the dam. He cited correspondence between Morrell and Ruff, and articles from the *Johnstown Tribune Democrat*. He also used an interesting statement made by Judge James Potts on November 7, 1889, in which the latter suggested several

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 190, 204.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 190-201.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 215-216.

of the legal actions that should have been taken by borough officials in Johnstown prior to the flood.²¹

In chapter six, Shappee focused on the flood. He began with several detailed accounts on the extraordinary amount of rainfall that fell on the area in the preceding months. He noted that while human carelessness contributed to the disaster, Pennsylvania received “the greatest rainfall...of the century.” Shappee was leaving it up to the reader to decide who was at fault for the disaster.²²

It took a native of the area to generate an interest in the event once again. David McCullough, born and raised in the mountains of Western Pennsylvania, produced one of the best-written accounts on the flood. He brought a new energy to the story and told it in full detail, employing reliable sources. In 1966, he wrote an article for *American Heritage*, which he later expanded into a book published in 1968. The article was called “Run For Your Lives,” which became the title of one of the chapters in the book, *The Johnstown Flood*.

McCullough, like Johnson and Dieck, wrote in a romantic style. It seems as though historians cannot escape the poetic nature of the Johnstown Flood. An example of this is McCullough’s description of Johnstown, “as though the bottom dropped out of the old earth and left it angry and smoldering.”²³

When he discussed the dam and the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, McCullough disclosed some of the names on the club list. He mentioned Phipps,

²¹ *Ibid.*, 217-225.

²² *Ibid.*, 232.

²³ McCullough, “Run For Your Lives!,” 6.

Chalfant, Lauphlin, McClintock, Mellon, Carnegie, and Frick. McCullough also stated that the club, under the direction of Benjamin Ruff, bought the dam and lake from the Pennsylvania Railroad. Johnson and Dieck did not mention Reilly as one of the owners. Perhaps this detail was not discovered for years after the devastation of the flood.

McCullough emphasized that the dam had broken previously, while it was under the ownership of the Pennsylvania Railroad. There had not been much damage, because the level of the water in the lake had been low and the release valves were utilized. Once the Pittsburghers gained possession of the dam, they repaired it using “virtually anything at hand,” and left a sag in the middle where it should have been at its highest.

McCullough added that while the people of Johnstown had mixed feelings about the wealthy club members, the townspeople were proud that their land had been chosen for such a resort. They were flattered by the idea. McCullough also mentioned that local boys made a sport of catching fish in the well-stocked lake. They would sneak in to bring supper home, straining relations between the natives and the club.²⁴

Everything in McCullough’s article appeared in greater detail in his book, *The Johnstown Flood*. He used sources ranging from court records to magazines and newspapers to testimonials and the autobiography of Andrew Carnegie. He also listed the victims in the appendix of the book. Unfortunately, McCullough did not provide footnotes.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

McCullough devoted a chapter to the Pittsburghers, called “Sailboats on the Mountain.” Information in this section included the previous owners and condition of the dam as well as the alterations made it by the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. McCullough also wrote a chapter on the sentiment of the people of Johnstown after the flood called “Our Misery is the Work of Man.” This chapter focused on the Pittsburghers and the issue of liability.

McCullough was not shy to point out the club’s fault for the disaster, but he did not fail to mention the previous owners of the dam. He reminded the reader that because the state was the original owner of the dam, it may have been apprehensive about taking legal action against the club. Even the people of Johnstown were to blame for not keeping a closer eye on the weak dam.²⁵ He cited newspaper articles, court cases, sermons, and even tombstones to support his arguments against the club members. He also discussed the role of the Red Cross and news reporters. McCullough had the benefit of writing some time after the flood. While McCullough is a popular historian, he provided a noteworthy work on the topic because he presented all sides of the tragedy.

Like McCullough, Michael McGough was a native of the area. He was born in Johnstown and went to Johnstown High School. He received his undergraduate degree from the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, went on to teach, and returned to school for his master’s degree at Shippensburg University and his Ph.D. from Pennsylvania State University. McGough does the best job of condensing vital information for the reader, and his work must have had an impact on the presentation of the club in both museums.

²⁵ David McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 253.

He is the most recent to write on the flood with his 2002 book, *The 1889 Flood in Johnstown Pennsylvania*. In this slim volume (only 180 pages), McGough gives a thorough analysis of the flood. Included are pictures, maps, a list of club members, a list of the victims, the Pennsylvania Railroad testimonies, Clara Barton's letter to the city, an application for relief, and a letter from the register of deeds.

McGough's use of primary documents has provided new ways for us to learn about the flood. He used various engineering reports that describe the negligence of the club. One such report, which appeared in *Engineering News*, was entitled "An Engineering Crime."²⁶ This report, much like the reports of *Engineering and Building Record* and the American Society of Civil Engineers, concluded that the original construction was stable. It was the club's reconstruction of the dam that was the cause for the disaster.

McGough also made use of a more recent engineering study conducted by *Civil Engineering* in May of 1988. Walter Frank, chief consultant, concluded that

If the reconstruction of the South Fork Dam had been rebuilt to the original specifications and construction, the disaster of May 31, 1889, would never have occurred. Granted a break like the one in 1862, when the culvert collapsed, would have caused great damage. However, the South Fork Dam as originally designed...would not have had water pass over it-the worst possible thing that can befall an earth and rock dam-the unquestionable cause of the 1889 Johnstown Disaster.²⁷

McGough devoted an entire chapter to the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, just as McCullough had. And McGough was not sympathetic toward the club. He

²⁶ The *Engineering News* was also cited in Dieck's text.

²⁷ Michael McGough, *The 1889 Flood in Johnstown, Pennsylvania* (Gettysburg, P.A.: Thomas Publications, 2002), 130.

detailed the establishment of the club, provided maps of the cottages along the lake, and included recently discovered photographs of club members in the second chapter.

Perhaps the most distinguishing portion of this work was in the epilogue.

McGough asked a series of questions about the event that he felt were “futile” to answer. He claimed that his questions provided the best explanation of the relationship between the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club and the people of Johnstown, between man and nature. Some examples are:

1. Did Joseph Johns permanently predispose his settlement to periodic flooding when he established it on a flood plain?
7. If Ruff had accepted Morrell’s offer to help during the reconstruction of the dam at South Fork, could the 1889 disaster have been avoided?
11. Had the dam at South Fork not been lowered to widen the cart way that ran across it, would the rising waters have ever overtopped the earthen structure?
16. Were the warnings sent to Johnstown of a sufficient level of urgency to report the level of pending danger accurately?
19. Was the storm that called on the Conemaugh Valley in late May 1889 so dramatic in nature that the dam at South Fork was doomed to failure regardless of any of its preexisting conditions?²⁸

McGough admitted that many of the questions the Johnstown Flood presented were difficult or impossible to answer. By asking these “what if” questions he showed that he had attempted to address them, but the answers were just not available to him. These resources may, on the other hand, be available in the future to historians attempting further the research on the event. The museums can use these materials to improve their understanding of the cause of the flood, which improves the experience for their visitors.

The various authors who have written on the flood have not been forgiving toward the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. But McCullough and Shappee were

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

the most extreme in their portrayal of the club members. McCullough was perhaps the most hostile toward the club. He relied heavily on the sentiment of the townspeople and the book seemed to tell the story from their perspective. Shappee gave the most balanced, scholarly account of the issue of liability. He did not convey sympathy for the townspeople when he described their treatment of the rivers. And his quote from a local judge on actions borough officials should have taken to avoid the flood provided a different perspective of the event. He contended that everyone involved was to blame.

Ideally, each museum should rely on all of these sources. But because each these museums represent different interests, they may choose to rely more heavily on the sources that best suit those interests. The Johnstown Flood Museum is located in the heart of the city. It represents the people of Johnstown and tells the story accordingly. It makes perfect sense for the Flood Museum to support McCullough's interpretation.

On the other hand, the Johnstown Flood Memorial is located on the site of the former Lake Conemaugh and the South Fork and Fishing and Hunting Club. The site represents the interests of the National Park Service and its operators seem to view the story from an outsider's perspective. Because of its location, it is understandable that this site focuses on the dam and the club. The Flood Memorial is similar to Shappee in its sentiment. Shappee is not necessarily forgiving towards the club, nor does he place blame. There is more of an emphasis on the time period and mentality.

This is not to say that the Flood Museum blames the club outright, or that the Flood Memorial defends it. The differences between the sites are complex and may not be so obvious. The artifacts that are displayed, the stories the tour guides tell, the film

presentations, and the overall atmosphere of each museum help reveal its predisposition. Each museum needs to be examined further to understand the interpretation it presents and the complexities that exist when presenting a controversial topic to the public.

Chapter 3

Two Memories of the Flood

The old Conemaugh lakebed, what was left of the dam, and the surrounding land lay abandoned after the flood. The members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club remained silent, and as the years passed the flood was nearly forgotten in Pittsburgh. In Johnstown, the survivors tried to move on and make the best of their situation.

Local businessmen were especially concerned that if the townspeople were to dwell on the event, it would be bad for their spirits and for business. George Swank, editor of the *Johnstown Tribune* agreed with this sentiment in an article describing the ceremonies at Grandview Cemetery on June 1, 1892. "It may be well to consider that the flood, with all its train of horrors, is behind us, and that we have hence forth to do with the future alone."¹

The people spent many years trying to put the tragedy behind them. But they had no way of knowing that the future would require them to revisit the past. Only a few decades after the flood, two historic sites were devoted to it. Special events were held and a wave of tourists descended on the town. But the town saw many changes occur before the benefits of promoting the past were realized. There were some turbulent years ahead.

After the flood, the city of Johnstown reinvested in the steel mills. Steel production was still the major source of income. Unfortunately, every time the steel mill

¹ David McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 267.

was in trouble so was the town. Johnstown would remain a one-company town for many years.

On June 1, 1891, the Cambria Iron Company built the Inclined Plane on the side of Yoder Hill to provide reliable transportation to the newly developed community of Westmont. Westmont was one of seven boroughs created above the flood plain after the 1889 flood. But the only way to get to there was to take steep, winding roads up the hillside, which were inaccessible in bad weather. The Inclined Plane cost \$133,296, using standard railroad equipment from the Cambria Iron Company.²

In 1898 the Cambria Iron Company was reorganized as the Cambria Steel Company. Production increased from 428,266 tons in 1900 to 1,193,000 in 1913. Employment rose and so did the production lines. Structural steel, plate, and freight cars were added to its products at the onset of the First World War. The Bethlehem Steel Corporation bought the Cambria Steel Company in 1923.³

The plant was isolated from the necessary raw materials and the majority of products made in Johnstown were specialty pieces. This would be the case throughout the company's existence. From the time Bethlehem purchased the plant until the onset of the Great Depression, employment fell from 13,000 to 8,500.⁴

² Michael McGough, *The 1889 Flood in Johnstown, Pennsylvania* (Gettysburg, Pa: Thomas Publications, 2002), 143-142; *A History of Johnstown's Inclined Plane* (Johnstown, Pa: Johnstown Visitor Center Brochure). The Inclined Plane has two sets of tracks which allow one car to go from Johnstown to Westmont, while the other car runs simultaneously from Westmont to Johnstown. The lower entrance to the railway can be reached by crossing the Stonycreek River on a heavy iron bridge. The runway for the Inclined Plane is 896.5 feet long and has a seventy-one percent grade. It is the steepest vehicular inclined plane in the world.

³ Johnstown Flood Museum Association and U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service, *Management Plan for the Johnstown Flood Museum Association and a Proposal for Economic Revitalization in Johnstown* (Denver, Col.: Denver Service Center, 1988), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Johnstown had more to worry about than its finances when nature struck again. On March 17, 1936 the town experienced another major flood. Large amounts of snow had fallen on the hills that year. Unusually warm temperatures, coupled with severe rain, caused the snow to melt that St. Patrick's Day. The streams overflowed onto the streets, placing a third of the town under water. The water depth reached seventeen feet in some places. All sorts of household appliances floated down the alleys. Bridges crumbled, houses were swept away, and cars were carried across town.⁵

The next day the townspeople came outside to assess the damage, and discovered a new danger. A rumor circulated that the Stonycreek dam, which was many times the size of the old one at South Fork, had broken. Everyone ran to the hills. Luckily it was a false alarm; the dam held. Twelve people drowned in the flood, and approximately twelve more died from stress-related incidents. The total cost of the damage was estimated at \$41 million.

The National Guard and the Works Progress Administration came to Johnstown's aid. The townspeople were ready to rebuild the city again. This time, however, they vowed to rid their town of floods once and for all. A total of fifteen thousand Johnstownians wrote to President Franklin Roosevelt for federal aid. The President agreed that flood protection was needed in Johnstown, so he authorized the federal government to build dams and river walls in flood zones. He visited Johnstown in August of 1936 to promise his support for a flood-free city.

⁵ Howard Munson, *Triumph of the American Spirit: Johnstown Pennsylvania* (Lanham, Maryland: Johnstown Flood Museum and The American Association for State and Local History Library, 1989), 115. During the 1936 flood, the Inclined Plane carried approximately four thousand people to safety as the floodwaters submerged the city. (From *A History of the Johnstown's Inclined Plane*.)

It took the Army Corps of Engineers from 1938 to 1943 to complete “the most extensive channel improvement in American history.” At its completion, the riverbanks consisted of concrete and steel reinforcement. Hoping to bring new businesses to the area, the town boasted its flood-free status. In fact, little was mentioned of the floods in Johnstown’s past. It was a new and improved Johnstown.⁶

The town was once again able to put its energies back into steel making. World War II gave the Bethlehem Steel Corporation the opportunity to contribute to the war effort at home and helped pull Johnstown, along with the rest of the county, out of the Depression. By 1950, Bethlehem was producing 2.3 million tons of steel per year. Unfortunately, Johnstown’s steel mills would not be able to maintain this success for long. Much like the rest of the country, the city began to experience the decline of the industrial revolution.⁷

As members of the community consumed themselves with concerns of the present day, the construction of a new highway forced them to confront their past. In the early 1960’s, Route 219, the main highway connecting the neighboring town of Somerset to Johnstown, was only two lanes wide. Plans for a new 219 called for a path through the abandoned South Fork Dam site, using the ends of the remaining dam as supports for the road.

This created a buzz in Johnstown. Many people wondered why anyone would want to preserve the empty reservoir that once brought about the death of more than two thousand people. But others thought that a movement to preserve the dam would help

⁶ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

⁷ Flood Museum Association and NPS, *Management Plan*, 6.

outsiders learn about the flood and the town. Gradually enough people saw the importance of commemorating the flood for Congressman John Saylor of Johnstown to take the case to the federal government. Because of Saylor's efforts, the National Park Service became involved in a movement to preserve the area. The Johnstown Flood certainly carried national significance.⁸

Before the 1960's, the federal government had not put too much thought into adding historic sites to the National Park Service. There was more of a focus on natural resources. This was about to change. On August 31, 1964, an act of Congress established the Johnstown Flood National Memorial and the Allegheny Portage National Railroad National Historic Site.⁹ Fifty acres in Cambria County were designated to commemorate the Johnstown Flood.¹⁰ It took a few years, however, for a small visitor contact center to be erected on the south abutment of the dam.¹¹

The legislation also allowed for cooperative agreements with the state, local, or private organizations to create and maintain markers. It was amended in 1972 in order to acquire more land and increase development.¹² The allocated amount of \$2,000,000 was

⁸ Doug Richardson, Park Ranger/Interpreter, Johnstown Flood National Memorial, interview by author, notes, St. Michael, PA, 3 March 2006.

⁹ The Allegheny Portage Railroad was the first inclined plane railroad constructed over the Allegheny Mountains. It was considered a "technological wonder" because it opened the interior of the county to trade and settlement. It was in operation between 1834 and 1854 and is located 12 miles west of Altoona, Pennsylvania ("Allegheny Portage Railroad" (National Park Service) [data base online] available from <http://www.nps.gov/alpo/>; Internet; accessed 25 February 2006.)

¹⁰ Johnstown Flood National Memorial, Cambria County, Pennsylvania, *Draft Interpretive Prospectus Draft Development Concept Plan, July 1983* (Denver: C.O.: Denver Service Center, 1983), 39; *To provide for the establishment of the Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site and the Johnstown Flood National Memorial in the State of Pennsylvania, and for other purposes*, Public Law 88-546 U.S. Statutes at Large 78 (1964): 752.

¹¹ Richardson, interview, 28 February 2006. An exact date for the construction of a contact center is unknown. It was only one room that contained information for visitors.

¹² Flood Memorial, *Prospectus*, 39 (78 Stat. 752).

changed to \$2,244,600 and approximately 53.6 acres of land were added to the boundaries of the site. No more than \$10,000 could be appropriated for the acquisition of more land.¹³

Gus Hultman became the first superintendent of both the Allegheny Portage Railroad NHS and the Johnstown Flood National Memorial in 1965. His primary role was to preserve the resources and establish the boundaries of the two sites. James Zinck succeeded Hultman as the superintendent of both sites in 1969. Under Zinck's supervision the Western Pennsylvania Group was created, making him the superintendent of the Allegheny Portage Railroad, the Flood Memorial, Fort Necessity, and Friendship Hill.¹⁴

Only a few years after the Flood Memorial was created, locals decided to create a site of their own. The formation of a second site devoted to the same topic created a complicated situation. Because they were so close in age, the sites grew together and cooperated with each other, but maintained their individuality. The development of one site cannot be discussed without understanding the other. Their unique relationship makes for a complex history.

The idea to create a site in downtown Johnstown came as an outgrowth of David McCullough's research for the book, *The Johnstown Flood*, published in 1968.

¹³ *An Act to provide for increases in appropriation ceilings and boundary changes in certain units of the national park system, and for other purposes*, Public Law 91-272, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 86 (1972): 120.

¹⁴ Randall Cooley, Superintendent, Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site and Johnstown Flood National Memorial, 1981-1987, interview by author, notes, telephone, 24 February 2006.

McCullough had to travel all over town to conduct his research. He suggested that there should be a place in Johnstown that was dedicated to the Johnstown Flood.¹⁵

Many things would have to happen before a museum could be realized in Johnstown. Citizens in Johnstown would need to find the proper facility for a museum and raise funds to sustain it. The public would have to be convinced of the importance of commemorating the flood as their economy spiraled downward. By the 1970's the Bethlehem Steel Plant was aging and was unable to afford the anti-pollution requirements of the Environmental Protection Agency. In the next three years the company announced that 4,700 jobs were to be eliminated. Obtaining support for a museum looked like an uphill battle.¹⁶

Planning for a museum in Johnstown officially began on August 12, 1969 at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Cambria County Historical Society. On that day there was a discussion about moving the organization's small museum from Ebensburg to Johnstown. The historical society hoped that there was room and enough funds for it to move into the new library that was being constructed. But under the terms of the grant to build the new library, this was not possible. The matter was dropped for nearly a year.

On July 17, 1970, the committee met again to discuss the possibility of establishing a museum in Johnstown. The Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Cambria County Historical Society, Don Matthews, Jr., presented a collection of artifacts

¹⁵ Richard Burkert, Executive Director, Johnstown Area Heritage Association, interview by author, notes, Johnstown, P.A., 17 October 2005.

¹⁶ Muson, *American Spirit*, 130.

that had survived the 1889 flood. The articles had been taken from Johnstown to Michigan. The owner stipulated that he would send the artifacts on the condition that they be placed in a museum in Johnstown. Don Matthews suggested that a committee be formed “to determine the interest in obtaining a property so that a Flood Museum might be started.”

On September 3, 1970 the Johnstown Flood Museum Committee met and officers were nominated. The name was changed to the Johnstown Flood Museum Association, and it was incorporated as an “independent, non-profit organization” on August 31, 1971. At the annual meeting on September 1, 1971, the search for a building began.¹⁷

The abandoned Carnegie Library was the appropriate historical building for the Museum Association to conduct business.¹⁸ The original library was built in 1879 by the Cambria Iron Company, and was destroyed in the 1889 flood. Andrew Carnegie offered to build a new library on the same site in 1891. He showed no signs of remorse about his membership in the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club or his alleged fault in the disaster, but offered the building as a donation.

Addison Hutton, of Philadelphia, was the architect for Carnegie’s vision. The French Gothic building cost a total of \$55,000. The foundation consisted of twenty massive stone piers, each five to seven feet in diameter. The interior woodwork was select Pennsylvania pine, which was finished in its natural color. The stairway was made of white marble tiles, with black marble trim. The third story had dormers and there were eight enormous chimneys, two on each side. The first floor featured lecture rooms, with

¹⁷ Don Matthews, Jr., *A Brief History of the Johnstown Flood Museum* (N.P.: N.P., 1982), 1.

¹⁸ Burkert, interview, 17 October 2005.

folding opera chairs that seated three hundred. The second floor was used for classwork and reading rooms. The third floor featured a stylish gymnasium and a leather-padded running track.¹⁹

By 1971, the building was badly in need of repair. There were cracks in the foundation and parts of the roof were falling off. The building was in decrepit condition, and the collections of the Cambria County Library had outgrown the space. The library, with the backing of the press and the citizens of Johnstown, moved out of the Carnegie building and into a new structure, the David A. Glosser Memorial Library Building on Main Street.²⁰

In March of 1972 the Carnegie building was added to the Pennsylvania Register of Historic Sites and Landmarks, and it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places four months later.²¹ In a plea for fundraising dollars, Frank Marra, the president of the Johnstown Flood Museum Association, commented on the choice of the building: “By utilizing this building we are preserving a national landmark.”²²

Also in 1972, the National Civic League named Johnstown an All-American City.²³ Marra thought that this recognition helped the case for the museum fund:

All of this is in keeping with our becoming an All-American City, for all of America responded to the plight of Johnstown following the great Flood in 1889, making the reconstructed city truly an All-American effort.²⁴

¹⁹ “History of the Building,” [data base online] (Johnstown Area Heritage Association); available from <http://www.jaha.org/FloodMuseum/oklahoma.html#building>; Internet; accessed 25 October 2005.

²⁰ “Cambria County Public Library’s History,” (Cambria County Library) [data base online] available from <http://www.cclib.lib.pa.us/history.htm>; Internet; accessed 25 February 2006; Burkert, interview, 17 October 2005.

²¹ Matthews, *Brief History*, 2; Burkert, interview, 17 October 2005.

²² “Museum Group Seeks \$200,000.” *Johnstown Tribune-Democrat*, Wednesday, April 18, 1973.

²³ “Museum Given Post,” *Johnstown Tribune-Democrat*, Tuesday, April 17, 1973; “Past Winners of the All-American City Award,” [data base online] (National Civic League) available from http://www.ncl.org/aac/past_winners/past_winners_1970s.html; Internet; accessed 26 February 2006.

In the spring of 1973, the association was still shooting for its \$200,000 goal to purchase the Cambria Library. The building was rented out from the Cambria Library Association until the fundraising goal was met.²⁵

The Johnstown Flood Museum Association called on the National Park Service to develop a plan for the use of the building and design the exhibits. A rare cooperative agreement was signed by the two groups, which allowed the Museum Association to pay the NPS for its professional services.²⁶ Seven representatives from the National Park Service arrived in Johnstown on April 11, 1973, to help the Museum Association develop the former library into a museum.

Russell Hendrickson, the chief of the Division of Museums at the NPS Center at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, led the group. It also included the NPS interpretive coordinator, exhibit designer, historic architect, an interpretive specialist from the northeastern regional office in Philadelphia, and the interpretive specialist from the Western Pennsylvania Group. Also present was James Zinck, superintendent of the Western Pennsylvania Group. The NPS team began their six week stint in Johnstown by videotaping the building and various areas of the city. They returned to Johnstown as needed with a completion goal of May 31, 1973, the eighty-fourth anniversary of the flood.²⁷

As planned, the first exhibits at the Johnstown Flood Museum opened on May 31, 1973, with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on the front steps before between fifty and seventy

²⁴ "Museum Group Seeks \$200,000." *Johnstown Tribune-Democrat*, Wednesday, April 18, 1973.

²⁵ "Museum-Planning Assistance Begins," *Johnstown Tribune-Democrat*, Thursday, April 12, 1973.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Only in rare cases does NPS staff work for private organizations.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

witnesses. The sign on the front door read, "This is only the beginning," reminding visitors that the museum was a work in progress.²⁸ Although the Johnstown Flood Museum Association concentrated its efforts on telling stories of all the floods that had swept Johnstown, its scope included the interpretation of the town's industries, transportation systems, and social histories.²⁹

The *Johnstown Tribune-Democrat* supported the fundraising efforts of the association and hoped to convince the community of the importance of such a museum.

To some it may seem to be somewhat mercenary to consider the economic factors associated with the Johnstown Flood Museum...but they should not be ignored. The city has its Inclined Plane; a tourist draw. The Johnstown-Cambria County War Memorial brings in people from outside the city. The city can attract tourists on that basis alone. Add some more emphasis on the historical weight of the Flood of 1889 and the attraction becomes even stronger.

With the opening of the Flood Museum...added stature is given to our flood heritage. And if...economic gain also is realized, backs should not be turned to it. Because Johnstownners...should take pride in the new museum and be interested in its well being, there is no reason to doubt that private and corporate citizens will transmit that pride and interest into tangible assistance to help get the museum off to a solid start in its new role as a community institution.³⁰

The Flood Museum reached the \$200,000 goal just a few months later.

As the museum boasted of its success, the future of the economy began to look brighter. Instead of giving in to unemployment, the steel company encouraged the founding of the Johnstown Area Regional Industries (JARI). Bethlehem was the major contributor to the association, which was dedicated to introducing new steelmaking

²⁸ "Flood History Enshrined 84 Years Later," *Johnstown Tribune-Democrat*, Friday, June 1, 1973.

²⁹ Flood Museum Association and NPS, *Management Plan*, 1.

³⁰ "The Flood Museum," *Johnstown Tribune-Democrat*, May 31, 1973.

technologies to town. Bethlehem had even made plans to install an oxygen furnace.

Then weather ran its course once again.³¹

On July 19, 1977 the “flood-free city” flooded again. Severe thunderstorms positioned themselves between the Alleghenies, directly over Johnstown. Rain fell from ten that night until four the following morning. The rivers and creeks overflowed their concrete embankments and crushed expressways, factories, and homes. The water company dam broke and rivers rose beyond the heights of the 1936 flood. The damage estimated \$300 million.³² Eighty-five people were killed in the 1977 flood. Eight were never found.³³

The townspeople felt betrayed. One resident wrote on the side of City Hall, “Johnstown Is Not Flood-Free.” One plaque, which became a best seller, pictured the back-side of a donkey with the inscription, “Flood Free Johnstown? My ____.” There was even talk of Bethlehem Steel pulling out of the area because of the heavy damage it had sustained.³⁴

It seemed the town could not get a break. But the Flood Museum Association refused to let the museum fall by the wayside. For many years the museum functioned under a tight budget. But through the support of the community, the Flood Museum Association was able to make occasional improvements to the site and hire employees from the history field.

³¹ Muson, *American Spirit*, 130.

³² *Ibid.*, 118-119.

³³ McGough, *The 1889 Flood*, 152.

³⁴ Munson., *American Spirit*, 119, 130.

In 1979, Richard Burkert became the museum's first professional when he was hired as the executive director of the association. Previously, no historians had worked for the organization.³⁵ A native of Harrisburg, Burkert had received his master's degree and was working as the executive director of the Indiana County Historical and Genealogical Society before his appointment in Johnstown. Burkert soon became a prime mover for the centennial celebration.³⁶

The future of the museum in downtown Johnstown looked bright. But up the road in St. Michael, the NPS was not fulfilling its purpose of commemorating the flood. Plans were made to improve the site. Soon after the Flood Memorial was established, the National Park Service saw the need to expand its role with the construction of a visitor center. The NPS was pleased that the memorial provided a place for enjoyable outings. Visitors came to the park to hike, picnic, and enjoy the exhibits and programs. But most visitors were confused about the site's connection with the flood and they did not understand where and how the flood happened.³⁷

When James Zinck was hired as the superintendent in 1969, his mission was to acquire the land and help create a management plan for the Flood Memorial. He did not retire until the plan was complete in 1980.³⁸ The NPS long-range general management plan, drafted in 1980, recommended the building of visitor facilities above the north dam. This plan followed outlines set forth in legislation passed by the federal government. The management statement concluded that

³⁵ Burkert, interview, 17 October 2005.

³⁶ Matthews, *Brief History*, 3.

³⁷ Flood Memorial, *Prospectus*, i.

³⁸ Cooley, interview, 24 February 2006.

The purpose of the Johnstown Flood National Memorial is to commemorate the tragic Johnstown Flood of May 31, 1889, by preserving the remnants of the South Fork Dam and interpreting the story of its failure and the results that followed.³⁹

The Johnstown Flood Memorial's goal was

To interpret the causes and significance of the Johnstown Flood in the nation's economic, social, and technological history and to foster an awareness of its relationship to contemporary American society.⁴⁰

The NPS also saw the importance of cooperating with the Johnstown Flood Museum Association and the Cambria County Historical Society to provide a balanced interpretation and to provide visitors with similar cultural resource information.⁴¹

When Zinck left in 1980, he recommended that the Western Pennsylvania Group dissolve. This meant that two superintendents had to be hired when he left, one for the Allegheny Portage Railroad and Flood Memorial and another for Fort Necessity and Friendship Hill. In 1981, Bill Fink was assigned to Fort Necessity and Friendship Hill and Randall Cooley was assigned to Allegheny Portage Railroad and the Flood Memorial.⁴²

Cooley's appointment to the two sites was a turning point for the Flood Memorial and for the region. By 1982 the entire country fell into recession and many steel mills closed. In Johnstown, Bethlehem Steel announced that it would close for nine months. U.S. Steel was also in trouble and began to lay off its workers. Johnstown's

³⁹ Flood Memorial, *Prospectus*, 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*

⁴¹ *Ibid*.

⁴² Cooley, interview, 24 February 2006.

unemployment rate became the highest in the country at twenty-six percent. Something had to be done.⁴³

In the 1980's, leading citizens of Johnstown realized that they could capitalize on their unique setting to create a tourist-based economy. As early as 1973, fundraising efforts for the museum advertised how a flood museum could pick up the "economic slack" for the steel mills.⁴⁴ The Johnstown Flood Centennial provided the best opportunity for revitalization. The town proposed to use the event that had once threatened to wipe it off the map to help keep it on the map. The once booming steel town was prepared to make the transition to a tourist destination. And hospitals, banks, and retail businesses began popping up all over the city.

During his time as the superintendent of the Flood Memorial, Randy Cooley's primary duty was to implement management plans created by the NPS. These plans required Cooley's leadership in the centennial celebration and the creation of a visitor center at the Flood Memorial. But he would eventually assume an even larger role in the region.

As superintendent of the Flood Memorial, Cooley was automatically placed on the board of the Johnstown Flood Museum Association. The board met regularly in the basement of the museum building to discuss various concerns, from interpretation to fundraising. Cooley understood that the story of the flood could not be told successfully unless the museums worked together. Despite his involvement with the national organization, he immersed himself in the local community.

⁴³ Munson, *American Spirit*, 119, 130.

⁴⁴ "Promote What We Have" *Johnstown Tribune-Democrat*, June 18, 1973.

In 1983, Randy Cooley received a phone call from Congressman John Murtha (12th District, Pennsylvania). The unemployment rate in Johnstown was astronomical and Murtha was looking for a solution to the setback in the economy. Murtha hoped to use the centennial of the flood as a tourist draw. He informed Cooley that Congress could pass economic diversification legislation for southwestern Pennsylvania, but Cooley needed to make a case for industrial heritage in the area.⁴⁵

Cooley saw Johnstown's potential. It was a typically depressed steel town that had been hit by three major floods within a hundred years. The citizens of Johnstown did not leave when the going got rough. After each flood they rebuilt their city. The people of Johnstown were resilient, and they had deep family roots and historical ties to the area.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Cooley, interview, 2 February 2006.

⁴⁶ Muson, *American Spirit*, 13-19.

Chapter 4

Preparing for the Flood Centennial

By 1983 the boundaries at the Flood Memorial surrounded 175.5 acres, of which fifty-eight were donated. Forty thousand people were visiting the Flood Memorial each year. The visitor center proposed by the National Park Service in 1980 was ready to be constructed. In order to do this, Randy Cooley and the NPS issued a “Draft Interpretive Prospectus Draft Development Concept Plan” that described their goals in detail. The plan discussed visitor use and interpretation, general development, and operations.¹

Cooley remembered the condition of the Flood Memorial when he was hired in 1981. A larger information center had been built in place of the first contact center on the south abutment in 1977.² But it was not something to brag about. When Cooley’s parents came to tour the site, his mother poked fun at the contact center, asking if it was an outhouse. There was much work to be done.

The existing contact facility on the southern side of the dam was inadequate for the park’s needs. The proposal called for the visitor center to be constructed on a hill above the remains of the dam on its northern side. The former lakebed, the remains of the dam, and the clubhouse and cottages could be seen from the proposed location of the

¹ Johnstown Flood National Memorial, Cambria County, Pennsylvania, *Draft Interpretive Prospectus Draft Development Concept Plan*, July 1983 (Denver: C.O.: Denver Service Center, 1983), 1-3, i.

² Doug Richardson, Park Ranger/Interpreter, Johnstown Flood National Memorial, interview by author, notes, telephone, 28 February 2006.

facility. If visitors desired a closer look, they could take a short walk to the edge of the north spillway and the former dam.³

The NPS intended the facility to provide the visitor with information on the history of the dam, local concerns about its condition, the factors that led to the failure of the dam, the magnitude of the break, the path of the flood, and its aftermath. The Park Service was also intent on giving the visitor a powerful and emotional experience through the use of an audio-visual program.⁴

The National Park Service generally takes five to seven years to complete a project. The prospectus was applied in 1984, so the Flood Memorial had only five years to finish the project in time for the centennial. The NPS was also intent on coordinating its efforts with that of the Flood Museum in Johnstown.⁵

A bill was introduced on September 30, 1985 to amend the 1964 legislation to “increase the development ceiling...and...provide for the preservation and interpretation of the Johnstown Flood Museum.” An appropriation not to exceed \$9,800,000 was granted to develop the Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site and the Johnstown Flood Museum. The Secretary of the Interior had authority to

provide technical assistance to mark, restore, interpret, operate, and maintain the Johnstown Flood Museum, and with funds appropriated specifically for the purpose, provide financial assistance to mark, restore, interpret, operate, and maintain the museum.⁶

³ Randall Cooley, Superintendent, Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site and Johnstown Flood National Memorial, 1981-1987, interview by author, notes, telephone, 2 February 2006; Flood Memorial, *Prospectus*, 7.

⁴ Flood Memorial, *Prospectus*, 9.

⁵ Cooley, interview, 2 February 2006.

⁶ *Amending the Act of August 31, 1964 (78 STAT. 752) Providing for the Establishment of the Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site and Johnstown Flood National Memorial*, H.R. 1963. 99th Cong., 2nd Sess. September 30, 1985; passed as Public Law 99-388 (100 Stat. 826).

Planning for a new visitor center in St. Michael and cooperation with the Flood Museum were part of a larger regional development scheme envisioned by Murtha and Cooley. In 1985, the National Park Service did a study of the Western Pennsylvania region entitled “Reconnaissance Survey of Western Pennsylvania Roads and Sites.” This provided a background for tourism-based projects that were to come. Identifying the culturally significant features of Johnstown and Altoona, the study concluded that cooperation between local, regional, state, and national interests could benefit the area’s development.⁷

That year, a “small army of professional historians, archeologists, architectural historians, folklorists, photographers, and other professionals” descended on Southwestern Pennsylvania. They traveled all over the area, invading libraries and courthouses. When they were through they had searched hundreds of documents and talked to hundreds of people in hopes of arguing a case for heritage tourism in the area.⁸

Early in 1986, Congress gave support for the National Park Service study and federal recognition to “the region’s significant historical, cultural, and natural features related to iron and steelmaking, transportation, and related industrial themes.” Soon thereafter, Congress appropriated \$430,000 with the understanding that the National Park

⁷ Historic Preservation Commission and the National Park Service, *Action Plan Draft: America’s Industrial Heritage Project, June 1987* (Cresson, P.A.: Heritage Preservation Commission, America’s Industrial Heritage Project, 1987), 4.

⁸ “It’s All About the Stories,” [data base online] (Westsylvania Heritage Corporation) available from <http://www.westsylvania.org/OurStory/Who2.htm>; Internet: accessed on 12 February 2006.

Service would undertake a more detailed study of the area and a plan to implement its idea for governmental cooperation. America's Industrial Heritage Project was born.⁹

America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP) set out to preserve the history of Johnstown and its neighboring communities. The area covered consisted of nine counties in western Pennsylvania: Bedford, Blair, Cambria, Fayette, Fulton, Huntingdon, Indiana, Somerset, and Westmorland. These counties were particularly important to the industrial revolution in America.

The key reason for the creation of AIHP was a lack of historic sites devoted to the development and progress of heavy industry. The focus of the project was on western Pennsylvania's contribution to the iron and steel, coal, and transportation industries. The project would focus on how to preserve and interpret this history within the nation's history of westward expansion and the growth of cities and industries. AIHP could then help to revitalize the region's economy by using its history to attract tourists.¹⁰

Project leadership for AIHP fell under the Southwestern Pennsylvania Heritage Preservation Commission, which was formed in December of 1986 through state and federal legislation. The commission was responsible for overseeing the programs of AIHP and planning for its future. Furthermore,

The commission was established to solicit input from area experts regarding the region's industrial heritage to further define, develop, and implement recommendations to preserve theme-related resources and promote tourism.

The National Park Service helped staff the commission.

⁹ Preservation Commission and National Park Service, *Action Plan Draft*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

The Heritage Preservation Commission's goal was to identify and promote historical resources in western Pennsylvania. It could then use these resources to the advantage of the region's economy and to help transform its transportation system. The commission required a high level of coordination between private and public sectors to realize its goals. This was accomplished through cooperation with numerous area businesses and organizations along with local, regional, state, and federal representatives.¹¹

On December 18, 1986, the Heritage Preservation Commission had its first meeting. Congressman John Murtha set the agenda for the thirty-three members who were representing their respective regions. The members divided themselves into four committees devoted to "cultural resources, tourism promotion and marketing, economic development, and transportation." The Heritage Preservation Commission could better realize the goals of AIHP by delegating specific responsibilities to individual committees.¹² The Commission had a life of ten years with an appropriation of \$10 million dollars per year.¹³

President Ronald Reagan signed Public Law 100-698 on November 19, 1988, giving the Commission the means to establish a connection between "the cultural heritage of the 9-county region in southwestern Pennsylvania [and] ...the three basic industries of iron and steel, coal, and transportation [so that they] may be recognized, preserved, promoted, interpreted, and made available for the benefit of the public."

¹¹ Preservation Commission and National Park Service, *Action Plan Draft*, memorandum.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ Cooley, interview, 2 February 2006.

Now millions of federal dollars could flow into southwestern Pennsylvania so that communities could “discover and tell their stories in a way that had not existed before.”¹⁴

Murtha also pushed a key piece of legislation through Congress in 1986 that involved the historic sites in his district. The legislation permitted the National Park Service to establish a formal cooperative agreement with the Johnstown Flood Museum Association. This agreement was possible because the Flood Museum fell under the goals of AIHP.

Under the legislation, the NPS agreed to provide “technical assistance...associated with maintenance, interpretation, administration, design, and curatorial management.” The NPS also agreed to give credit to the Museum Association in publications and printed materials, to allow the Museum Association to maintain the authority to operate the museum building, not to interfere with the building’s primary use as a museum, and to permit the Museum Association to maintain a gift shop.¹⁵

For its part, the Johnstown Flood Museum Association agreed to interpret, operate, and maintain the Flood Museum in cooperation with the Park Service, to provide the appropriate services for visitation and interpretation, to hire maintenance personnel, to prevent damage to the building, and to “manage the collection in accordance with the National Park Service museum management policy and guidelines.” The association was also required to carry liability insurance in the amount of \$500,000 per person, \$1,000,000 per incident.¹⁶

¹⁴ “It’s All About the Stories,” [data base online] (Westsylvania Heritage Corporation) available from <http://www.westsylvania.org/OurStory/Who3.htm>; Internet; accessed 12 February 2006.

¹⁵ Flood Memorial, *Prospectus*, 40-41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

Perhaps the most important portion of the cooperative agreement required the federal funds authorized for the Johnstown Flood Museum to be matched one-to-one by the Museum Association. Qualifications for matching funds included appraisal value of artifacts, property, and nonfederal funds. Both parties understood that the profits from the Museum Association's store would be used for the operation of the museum. It was clear that the federal government was not liable for the Museum Association's property, and both parties agreed not to discriminate against any persons working at their respective establishments.

This original agreement was to last for five years and could be renewed. It was signed by the superintendent of the Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site/Johnstown Flood National Memorial, the president of the Board of Directors of the Johnstown Flood Museum Association, the Regional Director of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Office of the National Park Service, the Executive Director of the Johnstown Flood Museum Association, and the Chief Contracting and Property Management Mid-Atlantic Regional Office of the National Park Service on December 16, 1986.¹⁷

In 1987, the Johnstown Flood Museum Association received assistance from the National Park Service to create a management plan for the Johnstown Flood Museum. The "Management Plan for the Johnstown Flood Museum Association and a Proposal for Economic Revitalization in Johnstown," published in 1988, summarized the efforts of the Flood Museum and the National Park Service to revitalize the city of Johnstown. The goal of the management plan was to commemorate the Great Flood and revitalize

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42-45.

Johnstown to make it “a city that is proud of its past and [one] that used collective pride to transform itself into one of the most interesting and dynamic communities of the 21st century.”¹⁸

By the time the management plan was issued, the Johnstown Flood Museum Association had a staff of thirteen professionals. Five were full-time employees: the executive director, the curator, the registrar and financial manager, the bookkeeper, and the assistant curator. An additional five employees were temporary staff of the Johnstown Flood Centennial Committee. They were not paid from the budget of the association. Three other employees ran the gift shop and were also paid their salaries from a different source. CETA workers and interns, most of whom volunteered their time, also assisted the association.¹⁹

The operating budget for the fiscal year of 1987 was less than \$100,000. This money was used to staff the museum and keep it open to the public. Federal funding and matching fund grants from the state totaled more than \$1 million, but this amount was not included in the operations budget because it was to be used for planning and rehabilitation purposes only.²⁰

The management plan grappled with problems facing the Flood Museum. The surroundings of the building caused accessibility difficulties. The building’s entrance was on Washington Street and it also sat on the corner of Walnut Street. From Walnut

¹⁸ Johnstown Flood Museum Association and U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service, *Management Plan for the Johnstown Flood Museum Association and a Proposal for Economic Revitalization in Johnstown* (Denver, Col.: Denver Service Center, 1988), 13, i-ii.

¹⁹ CETA stands for Comprehensive Employee Training Act. They are workers paid by the federal government.

²⁰ Flood Museum Association and NPS, *Management Plan*, 13, i-ii, 8.

Street, the building was slightly hidden by the Bethlehem Steel and United Way buildings. The museum sat only five blocks from the exit off of the Johnstown Expressway, but at the time the signs for this exit were scarce, and those that did exist were of poor quality.

There were some positive aspects to the museum's location. It had a large parking lot for visitors to the southwest. It was across the street from the historic Cambria Iron Company office, one of the few buildings to survive the 1889 flood. Within walking distance were the former Cambria Iron Company, Bethlehem Steel's Gautier Works, the Pennsylvania Railroad station, and the Inclined Plane.

Another problem the management plan addressed was the manner in which artifacts were stored in the building. The first floor told the story of the flood. The second floor focused on coal mining in the region. Collections were housed on the third floor of the building, with no climate control. This space had been used as an athletic club at one time, and featured a running track and wood paneling. Guests would most certainly enjoy this space if it were not off limits.²¹

In March 1987, the Johnstown Flood Museum Association's board decided that it was ready to expand the focus of the organization beyond the flood to include "coal, iron and steelmaking, and related inventions, technology, ethnic diversity, rise of labor, man versus nature, and humanitarian developments." The board's hope was that expanding programming in the community would make regional and national visitors more inclined

²¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

to visit the area. Program expansion also ensured the Johnstown Flood Museum Association a leadership role in the preservation of Johnstown's history.

In the big picture, the association planned to make Johnstown the forerunner for America's Industrial Heritage Project. By integrating its role into a larger scheme of a tourist-based economy and revitalization of Johnstown, the association would complement the AIHP's goals. The management plan attempted to make this goal a reality.²²

Now all the association needed was a new name to reflect its changing roles in the community. It was proposed that the Johnstown Flood Museum Association become the Johnstown Historical Association (JHA).²³ The management plan suggested that along with a change of name, the association should expand its board of directors to include the public and private sectors of the Johnstown area. The plan also recommended that representatives from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the National Park Service serve as advisors to the board.²⁴

Under the auspices of AIHP and the Southwestern Pennsylvania Heritage Commission, Richard Burkert and Randy Cooley planned for the opening of their respective sites for the 1989 centennial. Burkert's museum was already effectively interpreting the destruction and recovery from the flood. It made sense for Cooley's site

²² *Ibid.*, 13.

²³ But there was already a JHA: the Johnstown Housing Authority. The name of the organization would eventually become the Johnstown Area Heritage Association (JAHA), but this would not happen for many years to come. (Richard Burkert, Executive Director, Johnstown Area Heritage Association, interview by author, notes, Johnstown, P.A., 13 February 2006.)

²⁴ Flood Museum Association and NPS, *Management Plan*, 13.

to interpret the club, the dam, and the factors that caused it to break. Burkert and Cooley worked closely to ensure coordination between the two sites.

Burkert possessed the majority of the artifacts from the flood at his site; lending to what Cooley called “a typical museum approach.” The centerpieces of the Flood Museum were the artifacts and research collection exhibits. Cooley’s site had been authorized by Congress to memorialize the location and the people who died in the flood. The Flood Memorial included the former dam, and was a short distance from the cottages and the clubhouse. The centerpiece of the Flood Memorial was its movie, though another one was planned for the Flood Museum.

There were disagreements over a suitable film presentation. Since there were two films, both Cooley and Burkert could have their individual visions realized. Burkert wanted to emphasize hope and rehabilitation in Johnstown. He wanted to portray the people’s ability to recover and move on. Cooley wanted “a movie that makes you feel like you’ve been in a flood,” something “gut wrenching.” Both directors were able to achieve these goals.²⁵

Though each director tried to work closely with the other, there was not as much coordination between the two as Burkert would have liked. Because of the time constraints, he felt like it was a “mad dash for the finish.” Cooley had to divide himself between two sites and Burkert simply did not have the staff to meet his needs.²⁶

²⁵ Cooley, interview, 2 Feb 2006.

²⁶ Burkert, interview, 13 February 2006. Cooley was superintendent of both the Allegheny Portage Railroad NHS and the Johnstown Flood NMem. Burkert had only four full-time employees in the 1980’s.

Randy Cooley was able to see his vision become a reality, but not as the superintendent of the Flood Memorial. In 1987 Cooley became the director of AIHP and Pete Neigh replaced him as the superintendent of both sites. As the centennial neared, Bruce McKeeman was hired as the site manager of the Flood Memorial. By 1987 John Bundy replaced McKeeman.²⁷ The two site managers were hired to work with Cooley on the site to help make sure the construction of the visitor center and the renovation of the Unger House ran smoothly.²⁸ Major decisions were made at the Allegheny Portage Railroad NHS, so it helped to have site managers around during the Flood Memorial's creation.²⁹

Even though he left only two years later, Bundy became an integral part of the National Park Service's plan for the improvements at the Flood Memorial. His role as site manger also enabled him to act as a liaison between the National Park Service and the community of Johnstown. Bundy realized that cooperation between local, state, and national organizations was the key to success.

It's everybody's responsibility. We can't take a project that is this new and this massive and bring it life on the backs of a few folks. What we need is for everyone to say, "I want it to work." If everybody does that, and if everybody is willing to help, nobody will stop it. It will go on its own.³⁰

A total of \$5 million was spent on the project at the Flood Memorial, including the restoration of the Elias Unger Farm. The house was to be restored to provide office

²⁷ Cooley, interview, 2 February 2006.

²⁸ Colonel Unger was the president of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club when the dam failed. His barn had not survived over the years, but his house was still standing.

²⁹ Mary Ann Davis, Park Ranger, Johnstown Flood National Memorial, interview by author, notes, telephone, 15 February 2006.

³⁰ Johnstown Flood Centennial Project, "Metaform to Design Interior Exhibits," *Centennial Reports* Vol. 1 (November/December, 1987), Vol. 1: 6.

space for employees, and the visitor center would be made to resemble Unger's barn. The interpretative focus was on the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club and the flood, as planned.³¹

In 1987, the Flood Museum Association hired Metaform Incorporated to create the exhibits for the renovation of the Johnstown Flood Museum. Metaform had become famous for its exhibit designs at Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, and the Louisiana Pavilion at the 1984 Worlds' Fair.³² The firm was also scheduled to design exhibits for the Johnstown Inclined Plane, which was one of only five remaining passenger carrying inclines in the United States in the 1980's and the steepest vehicular inclined plane in the world.³³

Jack Masey, the president of Metaform, commented on the project. "We are very excited by the challenge of designing such interpretive exhibits as are proposed for the Johnstown Flood Museum and the Johnstown Inclined Plane," he said. The company's designs for the United States Pavilion at the Canadian and Japanese World Expositions won honor awards from the American Institute of Architects.³⁴

Metaform recommended that the Carnegie Library be restored to its original configuration and that past installations, such as the suspended ceilings, be removed. The company secured the funds for the addition of an elevator and a heating and cooling system to be located inside the building so that the historic exterior would not be

³¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Centennial Reports*. "Metaform to Design Interior Exhibits," November/December, 1987, Vol. 1: 7; Michael McGough, *The 1889 Flood in Johnstown Pennsylvania* (Gettysburg, Pa.: Thomas Publications, 2002), 144.

³⁴ *Centennial Reports*. "Metaform to Design Interior Exhibits," November/December, 1987, Vol. 1: 3.

compromised. Metaform's designs for the exhibits and the interior of the building and exhibits were accepted by the Johnstown Historical Association.³⁵

A Johnstown architectural firm, Ed Pawlowski & Associates, was contracted to undertake the restoration of the building. The restoration cost \$4.2 million in federal money. An additional \$2 million was set aside for the construction of the visitor center at the top of the Inclined Plane.³⁶

The year 1989 marked the centennial of the Great Flood. This gave Johnstown the opportunity to turn a somber memorial into a celebration of its history and perseverance. The community's leading citizens knew that the press was capable of descending on their town and painting a negative picture of its economic conditions. There was the potential for the national press to report that the steel mills had closed and the people were too stupid to leave. Johnstown had a chance to prove to the world that it had rebuilt, and overcome one of the greatest disasters ever to occur on American soil.

As early as 1984, the publisher of the *Johnstown Tribune Democrat*, Dick Mayer, was helping to organize the centennial. Neither Mayer nor Burkert wanted negative publicity for the town. Mayer was prepared to spin negative publicity so that Johnstown would be viewed in a favorable light.³⁷ He was also the chairman of the Historic Preservation Committee, which managed AIHP.³⁸

A series of events was planned for the spring and summer of 1989. The 1889 Johnstown Flood Centennial Project Committee worked alongside the Johnstown

³⁵ Metaform, Incorporated, *A Basic Concept for the Design of Exhibits in the Johnstown Flood Museum and the Inclined Plane Visitor Center* (Metaform, Inc., 1987), 3.

³⁶ *Centennial Reports*. "Metaform to Design Interior Exhibits," November/December, 1987, Vol. 1: 7.

³⁷ Burkert, interview, 17 October 2005.

³⁸ *Centennial Reports*. "Metaform to Design Interior Exhibits," November/December, 1987, Vol. 1: 1.

Historical Association and the National Park Service to plan the attractions and set up national public relations and marketing programs for visitors. The committee realized some of the events had the potential to become annual traditions.³⁹

The Centennial Project Committee described itself as “a broadly-based community group concerned with the future of Johnstown and Southwestern Pennsylvania.” The committee was prepared to address the problems of “unemployment, negative population growth, and an eroding quality of life,” which threatened Johnstown in the late twentieth century.⁴⁰

The committee expected its projects to attract between 500,000 and 1,000,000 annual visitors on an “on-going basis” after 1989. In addition to the Flood Museum and Inclined Plane Visitor’s Center, projects included a National Steel Heritage Center, Train Excursions, and an “Ethnic Historic District.”

These projects will serve not only as tourism development vehicles, but also will position Johnstown and the surrounding region as a high-quality environment in which to live, work, and locate businesses.⁴¹

The Centennial Committee was also intent on focusing the media on Johnstown’s attributes, by designing a marketing campaign to cover a 350-mile radius. The project was aimed at generating tourist dollars, improving the community’s morale, and convincing visitors to relocate to Johnstown.⁴²

In 1989, electric arc furnaces had replaced the fiery stacks and blast furnaces that travelers could once see from miles away. Fourteen miles outside of town evidenced the

³⁹ Flood Museum Association and NPS, *Management Plan*, 1.

⁴⁰ The 1889 Flood Centennial Committee, *The Johnstown Flood Centennial Project* (N.P.:N.P.), 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.

little amount of steel production that still existed in Johnstown: railcars were filled with barbed wire and steel scrap. Steel production was still important, but only ten percent of the people worked in the industry. Bethlehem Steel had employed twenty-two thousand workers at one time. In 1989 that number had fallen to twenty-two hundred.

The Pennsylvania Job Service reported the following: A total of 45,200 people were working in Johnstown in 1989, of whom 13,500 worked in manufacturing, 3,600 in mining, 2,600 in construction, 16,400 in wholesale/retail, 4,800 in finance/insurance/real estate, 2,600 in transportation, 12,600 in government, and 20,200 in the service sector.

In 1989 the population of Johnstown was 90,000, which represented a decrease of 5,000 from the 1980 census figure. There were seven public and eight private school districts, and the town was the home of two colleges: Cambria Rowe Business School and the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown. There were seventy-two churches, an orchestra, ballet, and theatre group, an arts center and three museums, including the Johnstown Flood Museum, the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art, and the Amateur Sports Hall of Fame. And, we must not forget the Inclined Plane. Even though many Johnstownners were leaving, city officials remained optimistic that as the town replaced steel industries with service industries it would eventually know prosperity again.⁴³

On May 30, the centennial celebration began with a ribbon cutting ceremony at Central Park and a parade that included eighteen units. Governor Robert Casey spoke to the crowd of thirty thousand people that had gathered in the streets. Later in the evening about eighteen thousand people gathered at Point Stadium to hear several speeches,

⁴³ *Centennial Reports*. "Johnstown: A City with Many Faces" Vol. 2, No. 5: 1-2.

including one by Congressman John Murtha, and musical performances. A total of 2,209 candles were lit in memory of the victims who perished in the flood.

The following day, four hundred people traveled to St. Michael to witness the unveiling of the Johnstown Flood Memorial. Murtha spoke at the dedication ceremony. Afterward, he used Joseph Johns's ax to cut the ribbon at the ceremony held in Johnstown at the newly renovated Flood Museum.

More centennial activities occurred later that day. People gathered at the Point Stadium to watch the lighting of an eternal flame and at Grandview Cemetery to honor the flood victims. The Conemaugh and Blacklick Railroad attempted to recreate the warning John Hess gave to East Conemaugh when the dam broke. A single diesel engine came down the valley with its whistle tied down. Two flood survivors were in attendance for the centennial events. Elsie Frum and Frank Shomo were honored at a banquet held in the evening.⁴⁴

Overall, Randy Cooley felt that the goals set forth for the centennial had been achieved. He was slightly disappointed that both sites used lighted maps to represent the path of the flood. But he was pleased that each site retained its individuality. If the sites were too similar, visitors would have no reason to visit both.⁴⁵

Richard Burkert reiterated the three main goals of the centennial, measuring the success of each. The first goal was to create nation-wide positive publicity. Burkert was

⁴⁴ McGough, *The 1889 Flood*, 155. Frum was six years old when the flood struck Johnstown. Shomo was only one hundred days old.

⁴⁵ Cooley, interview, 2 February 2006.

pleased with the enormous amount of public relations for the centennial. The marketing strategies were a success, bringing people from all over the country to Johnstown.

The second and third goals were long-term ones. The second goal was to hold ongoing special events. JAHA and the NPS still organize a May 31 program every year, but it simply does not have the public involvement it did in 1989. On the other hand, the Labor Day activities planned for the centennial had a lasting effect. The ethnic festival, the Johnstown Folkfest, has become a community tradition.

The third goal of the centennial was to generate heritage tourism in and around Johnstown. By 1991 the infrastructure was in place, but the potential for a “direct economic effect” was oversold. Johnstown is traditionally not a tourist destination. There have been economic benefits to heritage tourism, but the overall impact is subtle. Burkert and Cooley are hopeful that the region will benefit from heritage tourism over time.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Burkert, interview, 13 February 2006.

Chapter 5

The Johnstown Flood National Memorial

Located twelve miles east of the city, the Johnstown National Flood Memorial includes the remains of the South Fork Dam, the Unger house, and the visitor center. It is bordered by US 219, which intersects the Pennsylvania Turnpike twenty-seven miles to the south. Visitors must pay close attention to the signs, because the site is several miles off the main highway and the route through St. Michael, which did not exist at the time of the flood, causes drivers to feel as though they have made a wrong turn.¹

A sign directs visitors to turn left at the bridge off the town's main street. The road winds to the top of a hill and into a parking lot, which can accommodate a hundred cars, two buses, and five handicap vehicles. The lot overlooks the L-shaped visitor center, which was designed to resemble a barn and to blend into its surroundings using neutral colors. Fifty people can be accommodated in the visitor center. Operational space includes two offices, a workroom, a film booth, storage, a janitor's closet, and a mechanical systems room.²

¹ Johnstown Flood National Memorial, Cambria County, Pennsylvania, *Draft Interpretive Prospectus Draft Development Concept Plan, July 1983* (Denver: C.O.: Denver Service Center, 1983), 5.

² *Ibid.*, 13-14. After only one year, the facility needed renovations. Repairs had to be made to the roof because it was leaking, all the sidewalks had to be replaced, and the heating and air condition unit needed to be replaced. Richardson, interview, 3 March 2006



Figure 3. Visitor center.

Photograph by author

To the left of the visitor center is the Unger House. When the visitor center opened, the Unger farmhouse was to remain undisturbed for historical interpretation. Visitors cannot go inside because the staff uses the historic building for storage and office space. In addition, the floors cannot support a large amount of weight. The former dam and lakebed are in the valley below. Within view are the clubhouse and several cottages that belonged to members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club.³

³ Flood Memorial, *Prospectus*, 13-14.

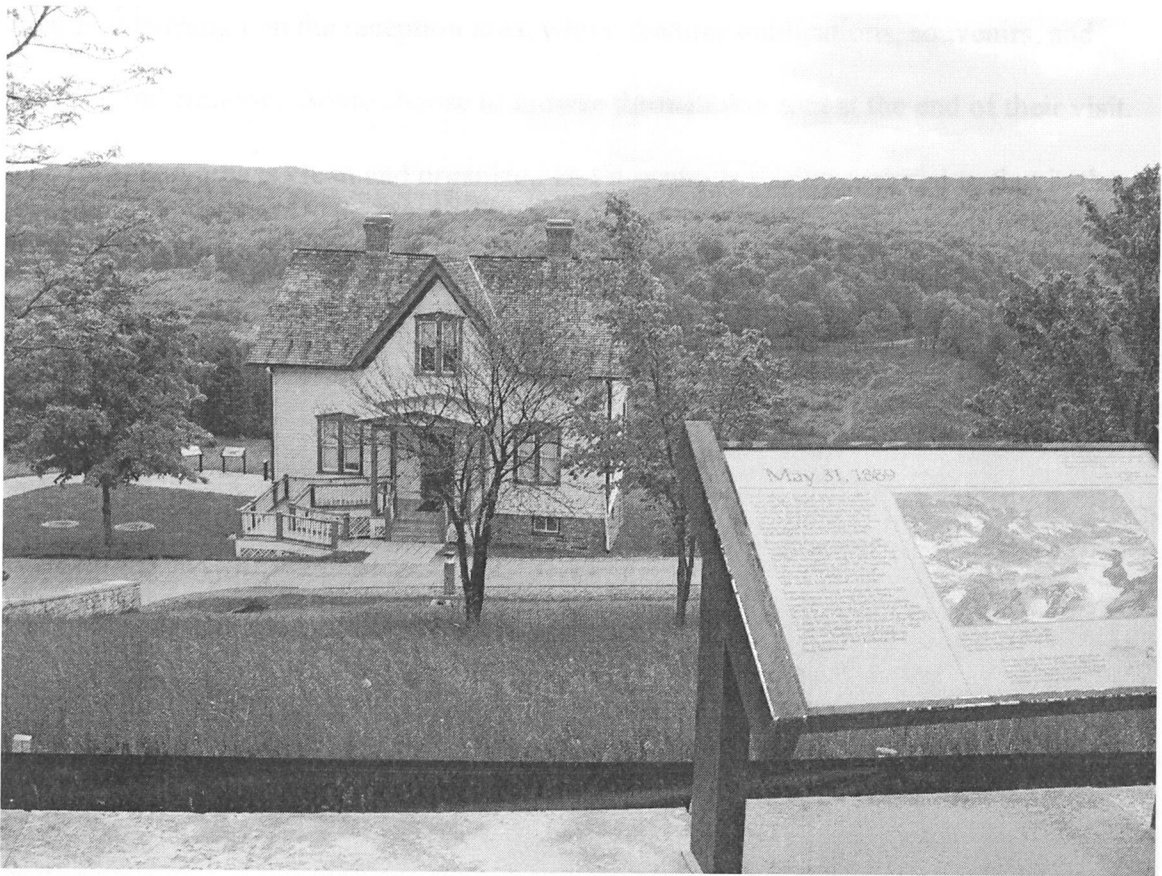


Figure 4. Unger House.

Photograph by author

The entrance to the visitor center is located at the foot of a ramp leading from the parking lot. Through the double glass doors is a small gathering room that caters to tourists by displaying brochures for area attractions. This room shows how the Park Service is keeping in tune with the local community. Visitors may decide to extend their stay in the area if they find something of interest.

As visitors travel through the next set of glass doors into the main exhibit area, an oversized doormat bearing the NPS logo reminds visitors of who owns and operates the site. Visitors then realize they are on the second floor. To their right, they find the familiar site of a service desk and an employee requesting an admission fee. Visitors are

then free to mingle in the reception area, which features publications, souvenirs, and regional information. Some choose to browse through this area at the end of their visit. The reception area is clean and organized and it contains similar material to that in the Flood Museum.⁴



Figure 5. Gift shop and service desk. Photograph by author

But even while visitors are rummaging through their wallets at the service desk, they cannot help noticing the life-size “debris wall” to their left, which includes a

⁴ Doug Richardson, Park Ranger/Interpreter, Johnstown Flood National Memorial, interview by author, notes, St. Michael, PA., 3 March 2006. The gift shop is run by Eastern National, a non-profit organization.

manikin clinging to an uprooted tree.⁵ The exhibit, entitled “a moment in the flood,” spans the length of both floors.⁶ This is probably the most distinguishing feature of the site. The image sends a powerful message to visitors of what it might have been like to be in the flood.

A quick look around the main floor gives visitors the sense that the space is lacking artifacts and interactive displays that are typical of most museums. But this site is not a museum. It is a visitor center, whose purpose is to acquaint visitors with the scenery below and provide background information on the flood. Visitors must be ready to read, and to use their imaginations.

The location of the visitor center can have quite an impact on visitors. Among the main floor’s distinguishing features are the picture windows that frame the former Lake Conemaugh. Many visitors find it difficult to imagine what the scenery looked like in 1889 because of the vegetation and the railroad tracks running through what was once the bottom of the lake. Tour guides attempt to explain the scenery to visitors.

There have been few changes to the exhibits at the Flood Memorial since the centennial. In a display case in the center of the floor is a diorama depicting the lake and the cottages. Visitors can envision what things might have looked like before the dam broke by comparing the display to the actual lakebed just outside the window. The windows in the main exhibit area are high enough to block out the highway while

⁵ “Johnstown Flood National Memorial,” [data base online] (Johnstown & Cambria County Convention & Visitors Bureau); available from; http://www.visitjohnstownpa.com/detail.php?mem_id=254; Internet; accessed 10 February 2006.

⁶ Doug Richardson, Park Ranger/Interpreter, Johnstown Flood National Memorial, interview by author, notes, St. Michael, PA, 3 March 2006.

enabling the visitor to view the lakebed.⁷ A balcony overlooks the lower floor and the debris wall. Along the railing are several audio boxes that allow visitors to Victor Heiser, a flood victim, speak of his experiences in the disaster. The audio boxes have been in the building since it opened to the public. They need to be updated.⁸

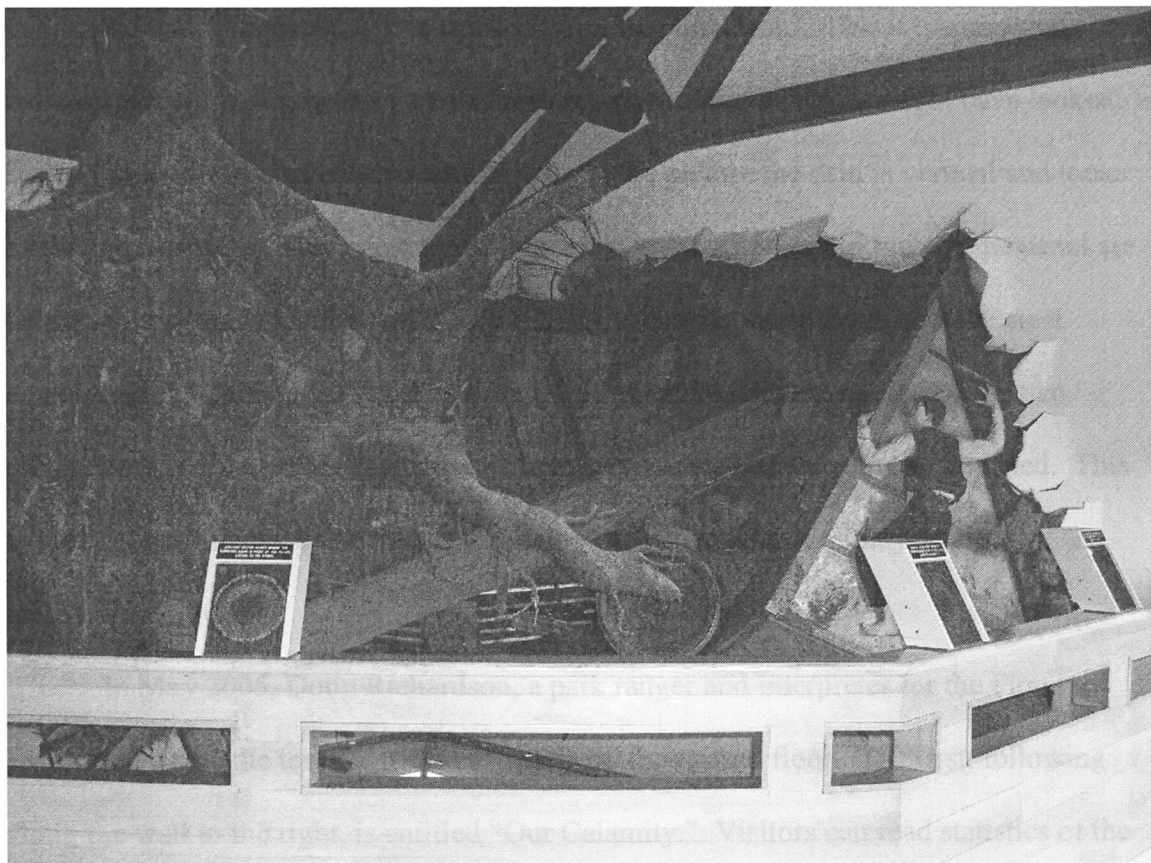


Figure 6. Debris wall and audio boxes.

Photograph by author

To the right are several panels that help the park rangers tell the story of the flood. In the shape of a V, the first panel has two sides. The display on one side, entitled “The Dam Gives Way,” shows what the dam might have looked like as the water pushed

⁷ Richardson, interview, 3 March 2006.

⁸ Victor Heiser lost his entire family in the flood. He left Johnstown a year later and put himself through medical school. He became physician and a public-health officer and fought disease all over the world. He was the author of *An American Doctor's Odyssey* and was credited with saving close to 2 million lives. From David McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 265.

through it. Visitors find this powerful. In front of this panel is the only artifact on display at the Flood Memorial: the telegraph operated by Emma Ehrenfeld.⁹ The rest of the flood artifacts owned by the Flood Memorial are in storage at the Allegheny Portage Railroad NHS.¹⁰

The other side of the V is entitled “Building the Dam.” This is a somewhat inaccurate picture of how the face of the dam and the lake behind it might have looked. Instead of having a slanted face with rip rap, in the picture the dam is vertical and looks as though it was perfectly constructed by a mason. But the descriptions on the panel are helpful to visitors. Numbers on such parts of the dam as the spillway and the crest correspond to descriptions at the bottom of the panel. Another panel, showing two pictures of the dam before and after the break, was installed when the site opened. This exhibit was confusing and difficult for visitors to understand. Employees decided to remove it in 2002.¹¹

In May 2005, Doug Richardson, a park ranger and interpreter for the Flood Memorial, wrote the text for two new panels on the second floor. The first, following along the wall to the right, is entitled “Our Calamity.” Visitors can read statistics of the flood, such as the death count and the number of entire families lost. Originally, Richardson wanted to reproduce the morgue books, but the print would be hard for

⁹ Ehrenfeld was the telegraph operator at South Fork during the flood. A man came up the tower at about noon and instructed her to warn Johnstown that the dam may break. Lines to the west were already down, so she only had contact with Mineral Point, four miles down stream. She passed the message on and the operator at Mineral Point passed it on to East Conemaugh. From there the message was wired to Johnstown and Pittsburgh. This message was the first of three warnings received by Johnstown. From McCullough, *Johnstown Flood*, 93-97.

¹⁰ Richardson, interview, 3 March 2006.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

visitors to read. He opted for a few quotes from David Beale, a local minister who took charge of the morgue during the flood, and photographs of tombstones at Grandview Cemetery to make the tragedy hit home.

The other new panel is a list of the victims from the 1889 Souvenir Booklet. Each page of the booklet was reproduced and displayed on the panel. Richardson's intent was for visitors to put individual names to the victims of the flood. This panel is appropriately called "The Victims."

The NPS allowed the employees of the Flood Memorial to create the layout and text for the panels in-house and choose the contractors to do the construction work. Richardson was pleased with the panels, except for the misspelling of Cincinnati. The cost for both of these panels totaled \$7,000.

Connected to the main exhibit area is an auditorium for films. Visitors are encouraged to look at the exhibits and view the film on the second floor in any order. The theater seats fifty people, and had several sound tracks and speakers until it was upgraded to digital sound in 1997.¹² The intent of the film, "Black Friday," is to present the horror of the flood. It begins with a view of the peaceful lake above Johnstown, then it invokes a sudden change of mood with "sights and sounds designed to carry a purely emotional impact." This message is conveyed in a number of ways, such as the sound of a train, fire, the cries of victims, and personal accounts read by actors.¹³

The visitor center at the Flood Memorial was constructed to memorialize the flood and its victims. The film helps to achieve this goal by paying homage to the

¹² *Ibid.* The film needs to be transferred to DVD format.

¹³ Flood Memorial, *Prospectus*, 12; Richardson, interview, 3 March 2006.

victims of the flood. The idea behind the film, which was created by Tim Radford in 1989, was to connect visitors to the victims through an emotional experience.¹⁴ Randy Cooley, the superintendent overseeing the project, achieved the “shock value” he was striving for. It is the only National Park Service film with a PG rating. Cooley said that “people either love it or hate it.” He felt this was the mark of a successful movie.¹⁵

Next, visitors can take the elevator by the theater entrance to the ground floor, or take the stairs by the service desk. The exhibits on the bottom floor were created in 1993 to correct some mistakes made in 1989. The first panel on the right (assuming the visitor took the elevator), is entitled “The World’s Charity.” Here there are photographs of the relief effort, articles, and lists of statistics. The highlight is the information about Clara Barton. One of the pictures has two African Americans in it. Richardson wanted to make sure people understood that all races and ethnicities were affected by the flood.¹⁶

The next panel’s title is “A Natural or Man-Made Tragedy?” It discusses the possible causes for the disaster. Such topics as the storm, the geography of Johnstown, the history of the dam, and the litigation that followed are discussed. The rights to reproduce one of the cartoons in the litigation section cost over \$2,000, but may just be worth every penny. It has a real impact on visitors because it summarizes the feelings the working-class people (especially those residing in Johnstown after the flood) might have

¹⁴ Mary Ann Davis, Park Ranger, Johnstown Flood National Memorial, interview by author, notes, telephone, 15 February 2006; Richard Burkert, Executive Director, Johnstown Area Heritage Association, interview by author, notes, Johnstown, P.A., 17 October 2005.

¹⁵ Randal Cooley, Superintendent, Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site and Johnstown Flood National Memorial, 1981-1987, interview by author, notes, telephone, 2 February 2006.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that while we will never know the true count of victims, a NPS intern discovered that there were approximately twenty-five African Americans killed in the flood who were never accounted for.

felt towards the club members. This cartoon shows the club members lounging above the “high tariff dam.” The flag flying above the clubhouse in the background has “monopoly” on it.

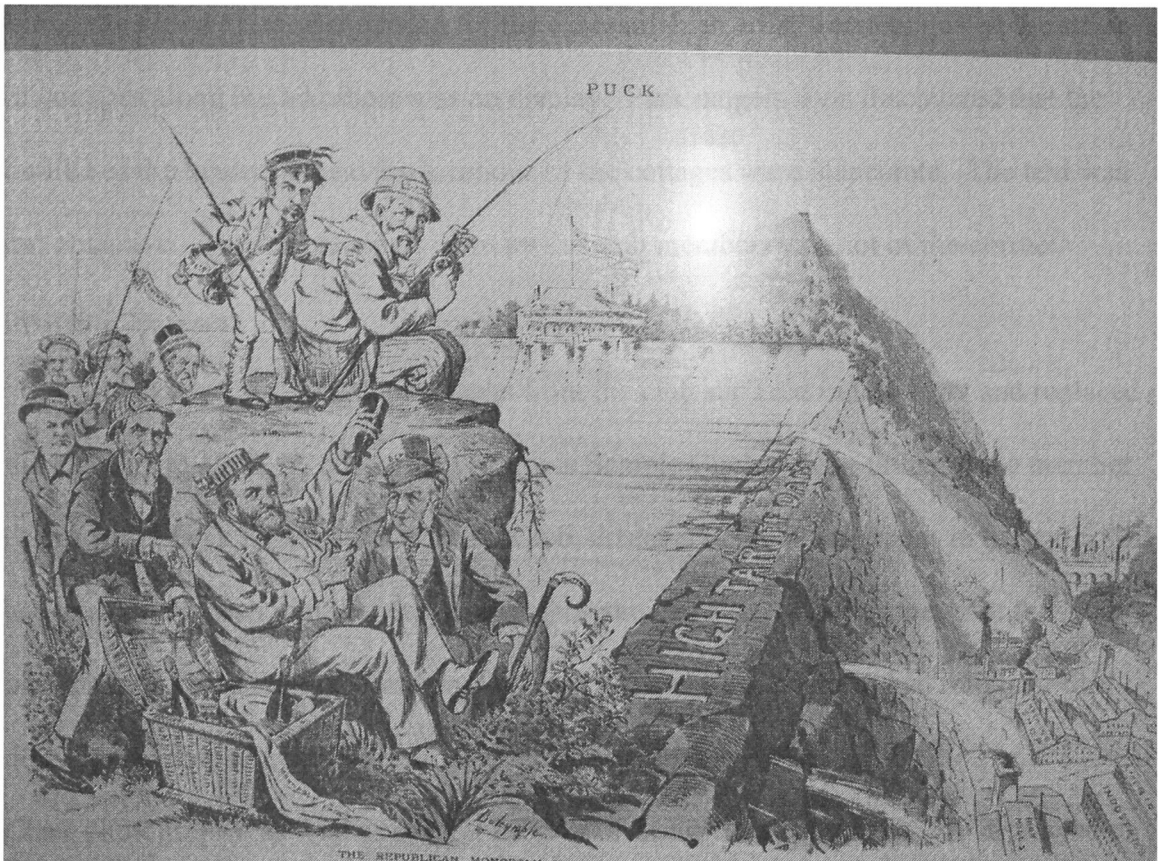


Figure 7. Cartoon reproduction. Photograph by author

In 2003 the Flood Memorial received funding to create an exhibit for the blind. In front of the “Natural or Man-Made Tragedy?” panel is a tactile model of the lake and the cottages. Few visually-impaired persons visit the site, but those who do can feel what others see out the windows. This is one of the ways the Flood Memorial is complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act. This exhibit replaced a computer kiosk where

visitors could find lodging and restaurants. The computer crashed frequently and was taken out after only one year.¹⁷

Perhaps the biggest change that has been made involves the exhibit on the club. When the Flood Memorial opened for the centennial, an artist's conception of the string of cottages along the lakeshore was on display. Park rangers soon discovered that the outline of the landscape and the locations of the cottages were inaccurate. The text was not objective. Even the clothing worn by the club members was not of the correct period.¹⁸

Luckily, a series of photographs from the club surfaced in late 1989 and replaced the painting in 1993. A descendent of Louis Semple Clark, whose father was a member of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, discovered the photographs in her attic. She had previously been told that the photographs showed a resort in Europe. But the publicity the centennial received made her reconsider what relatives had told her. She donated the photographs to the Johnstown Area Heritage Association. The Louis S. Clark photographs, as well as several Library of Congress photographs, are displayed on the third panel, which surrounds a television that continuously shows snapshots of the club. The total amount spent for all three panels and the television was \$17,000.¹⁹

In 1998 the NPS began an initiative called the Untold Story Movement. The purpose of this was to get NPS sites to tell lesser known aspects of the events they commemorated. The Flood Memorial staff began to research the club members so that

¹⁷ Richardson, interview, 3 March 2006.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.* The staff hopes that the television which displays the photographs will be replaced soon.

another perspective could be given to visitors. The result of their research is a bulletin board that displays pictures and information about some of the members of the club. This exhibit is on the wall to the right of the photographs of the club.²⁰

In the center of the floor is a fiber optic map, which demonstrates the path of the flood. This exhibit is similar to the map at the Flood Museum. It cost \$110,000. It may be replaced soon, because it has been there since the museum opened and it is outdated. On the walls behind the map are photographs taken of the devastation from the flood. Richardson also hopes to do an exhibit on the flood in pop culture and possibly sheet music and poetry.²¹

²⁰ *Ibid.* While conducting their research, NPS park rangers discovered that most of the descendents of the club members never knew anything about their relative's involvement in the club. They never spoke of the club or wrote of it in their diaries. Richardson tells visitors "You can interpret this anyway you like."

²¹ *Ibid.*



Figure 8. Fiber optic map.

Photograph by author

After visitors finish touring the visitor center, they can exit through the door on the ground floor. Once outside, they can follow the sidewalk to the Unger house. Signs outside help the visitors understand their surroundings and give them more information on the house and the dam, to which visitors can walk.

Because the site is a National Park, the natural resources of the area form a major part of it. Prior to the construction of the current visitor center, the contact center oriented visitors to the natural surroundings. The emphasis then was for visitors to walk to the dam. It was easier for visitors to walk to the edge of the dam because the contact center was closer to it. Today, park employees are hoping to shift the focus back to the

resources. Employees encourage visitors to take the extra time to walk down to the edge of the dam because this experience has the most profound impact on them during their visit.²²

As the Flood Memorial looks to the future, employees worry about funding and visitation. But they know that they are lucky to have Congressman Murtha pulling for them in Washington. Murtha has always been a key figure in the success of the Flood Memorial. In 2003, he came through for the site again in Congress, creating excitement all over town.

The Flood Memorial received the funding to acquire the clubhouse and Morehead and Brown Cottages in St. Michael. This project had been in the works for almost twenty years. In 1986, the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club Historic District was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.²³ The same year, the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Society was founded with the goal of eventually passing its mission on to the federal government.²⁴

In 1989, the residents of Saint Michael and the National Park Service created the Preservation and Interpretation Plan for the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club Historic District. This plan developed into a partnership “designed to protect, maintain and manage the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club clubhouse and other significant cottages in the historic district.” The 1889 South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club

²² *Ibid.*

²³ “National Index by Name,” [data base online] (National Register of Historic Places) available from http://www.nr.nps.gov/iwisapi/explorer.dll?IWS_SCHEMA=NRIS1&IWS_LOGIN=1&IWS_REPORT=10000081; Internet; accessed 8 June 2006.

²⁴ “Park to Acquire Historic Flood Buildings” [data base online] (News) available from <http://www.nps.gov/jofl/pphtml/newsdetail14841.html>; Internet; accessed 17 February 2006.

Historical Preservation Society was the primary local organization that helped the Park Service implement the plan.²⁵

The Park Service had not included the buildings at St. Michael when the original boundaries were set because, according to the preservation and interpretive plan, the local entity was believed to be capable of maintaining the buildings.²⁶ But over the years, the society struggled financially. It survived on donations from the community and grants from the local, state, and federal governments. The society raised a total of \$1.7 million to cover the costs of the restorations. In 2000 the society tried unsuccessfully to get the private sector interested in purchasing the properties. Some of the buildings were even up for sale on the open market by private owners.²⁷

By 2001, the buildings were in serious jeopardy. The Park Service decided it was time to step in. The NPS conducted “a special resource study and environmental assessment to evaluate options for protection and interpretation of the additional parcels of land.” It concluded that acquiring this land would be relatively simple. The property could simply be added onto the existing grounds of the Flood Memorial.

The South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club Historical Preservation Society spent nearly twenty years preserving these historic buildings so that the Flood Memorial could purchase them. The Memorial expanded by fourteen acres to include the club’s historic buildings. A little over two acres of land, the clubhouse, and three cottages were donated by the society. The acquisition of the buildings by the National Park Service would not

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

only provide for the preservation the buildings, but would also help the Flood Memorial tell the story of the flood. Congressman Murtha was able to secure an \$80,000 mortgage along with the necessary federal legislation.²⁸

Temporary repairs were made to the buildings, starting in the summer of 2005, with the hope of slowing the aging process until restoration money was available. The total cost to repair the club house and the Morehead Cottage was between \$1 million and \$3 million. The Brown Cottage was in better shape. Adding these structures enhances the overall interpretation at the site. Employees hoped that someday a trail would connect the historic district to the site.²⁹

The purpose of the Johnstown National Flood Memorial is to memorialize the flood and its victims. The site does not exist as a museum, but as a visitor center. It does not have climate control, so the artifacts the site owns cannot be put on display. Other than the debris wall, the majority of the exhibits in the visitor center consist of interpretive paneling. Visitors generally have short attention spans. Not only are they unwilling to walk to the dam; they may also be unwilling to read all of the information presented. Installing climate control would allow more artifacts to be displayed and attract a larger audience.

The lack of artifacts not only makes the site less attractive for adult audiences but makes it particularly boring for children. Children have trouble visualizing water in the hollowed lake bed and a dam where the two mounds of grass are. They may also find it

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ "Park Service to Preserve St. Michael Club House," [data base online] (News) available from <http://www.nps.gov/jofl/pphtml/news.html>; Internet; accessed 10 April 2006.

difficult to picture what their surroundings would look like without the town of St. Michael in the distance.

Another element that makes that site more appropriate for adults is the film. Because the film is rated PG, many parents decide not to let their younger children watch it. But even some adults have trouble with the movie's gory nature. While the film talks briefly about the causes of the flood and the path it took down the valley, it concentrates on the death and destruction.

The experience is comparable to that of a horror film because of the frequent shots of the cemetery, talk of ghosts, and eerie sound effects. The creators of the film accomplished their goal of making the audience feel like victims, but I'm not sure many people find this experience necessary to understand the flood. And children who are permitted to view the film will surely have nightmares.

But for visitors who are more interested in a more traditional National Park experience the site is worthwhile. Many visitors enjoy taking in the scenery at the Flood Memorial by hiking on the trails, picnicking, and learning about the various flora and fauna of the lakebed. The history of the flood draws visitors to the site, but their imagination of what the area's surroundings might have looked like in 1889 keeps them coming back.

Chapter 6

The Johnstown Flood Museum

The Johnstown Flood Museum cannot be discussed without mentioning the Johnstown Area Heritage Association (JAHA) as it exists today. At its inception, the organization was known as the Johnstown Flood Museum Association. The name was changed in 1991.¹

JAHA describes itself as “a non-profit, membership-based organization that exists to preserve and showcase Johnstown's nationally significant stories to the nation.” The Johnstown Flood Museum is one of the many entities that the Johnstown Area Heritage Association operates.²

The association is aware of Johnstown's unique setting, which is showcased through various recreational experiences. Under the umbrella of JAHA are two museums, the Johnstown Flood Museum and the Frank & Sylvia Pasquerilla Heritage Discovery Center. The Heritage Discovery Center was opened in 2001 to interpret the journey of Southern and Eastern European immigrants to Johnstown.³

The Wagner-Ritter House and Garden, the residence of three generations of steel workers, opened to the public in 2006.⁴ JAHA also plans to open a Children's

¹ Richard Burkert, Executive Director, Johnstown Area Heritage Association, interview by author, notes, Johnstown, P.A., 17 October 2005.

² “JAHA Mission,” [data base online] (Johnstown Area Heritage Association) available from <http://www.jaha.org/AboutJaha/JAHAMission.html>; Internet; accessed 28 January 2006.

³ “Virtual Tour,” [data base online] (Johnstown Area Heritage Association) available from <http://www.jaha.org/DiscoveryCenter/virtualtour.html>; Internet; accessed 28 January 2006.

⁴ “Virtual Tour,” [data base online] (Johnstown Area Heritage Association) available from <http://www.jaha.org/WagnerHouse/virtualtour.html>; Internet; accessed 28 January 2006.

Discovery Center in 2006. It will be built in the annex of the Heritage Discovery Center and will include exhibits on Johnstown, a café, a multimedia theater, a rooftop terrace, classrooms, and improvements to the architecture of the building.⁵

JAHA boasts “one of the largest free music festivals in the nation,” the AmeriServ Johnstown FolkFest. In 1990, JAHA helped produce the National Folk Festival when it came to Johnstown. The festival stayed for two years, and then moved on to another city. JAHA decided to take over the following year, renaming the event the Johnstown FolkFest.⁶

JAHA also hopes to start various other projects and special events that will aid in preserving the history of Johnstown and help to bring “positive national attention and visitors to [the] area.” The organization’s mission statement is as follows

JAHA is dedicated to preserving and interpreting the nationally significant historic heritage of the Greater Johnstown Area through its museum facilities, historical collection, and education programs. JAHA operates as a clearinghouse and catalyst for revitalization efforts based on cultural tourism and historic preservation.⁷

JAHA hopes to accomplish several other goals, such as the construction of a warm weather park venue and trails. Currently JAHA is working with the Redevelopment Authority to save the remaining Bethlehem Steel buildings. The National Park Service had originally planned to take over these structures, but by 1994 its hopes were dashed by a lack of funding.

⁵ “JAHA Plans New Children’s Discovery Center,” [data base online] (Johnstown Area Heritage Association) available from <http://www.jaha.org/AboutJaha/Children.pdf>; Internet; accessed 28 January 2006.

⁶ “FolkFest History,” [data base online] (Johnstown Area Heritage Association) available from <http://www.jaha.org/FolkFest/pastyears.html>; Internet; accessed 28 January 2006.

⁷ “JAHA Mission,” [data base online] (Johnstown Area Heritage Association) available from <http://www.jaha.org/AboutJaha/JAHAMission.html>; Internet; accessed 28 January 2006.

In the meantime, Bethlehem Steel's owner began to tear the buildings down. JAHA stepped in before it was too late. JAHA employees are trying to interpret the story of Bethlehem, in particular the blacksmith shop. Bethlehem is the only working steel mill to be turned into a museum, and, it is one of the few nineteenth century steel mill buildings still standing in the United States. This is just another way JAHA is attempting to realize the goals set forth at the centennial by trying to attract tourists and make the community of Johnstown more livable.⁸

The Johnstown Area Heritage Association has twelve full-time employees, who are divided between the Johnstown Flood Museum site and the Heritage Discovery Center. Approximately twenty volunteers work at these two sites, but the total number of people who volunteer for JAHA is anywhere between four and five hundred. The majority of the volunteers work at the Johnstown FolkFest each year.⁹

Full-time positions for JAHA are divided into departments. In the Development/Marketing Department there are the Development Director, FolkFest Coordinator, Marketing Manager, FolkFest Logistics Coordinator, and Development Assistant. The Collections/Technical Services Department has a Curator, Designer, and Archivist/Registrar. The administration Department has a Controller, and the Visitor Services Department has a Visitor Services Manager and a Maintenance Supervisor.¹⁰

⁸ Richard Burkert, Executive Director, Johnstown Area Heritage Association, interview by author, notes, telephone, 13 February 2006.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17 October 2005.

¹⁰ "Contact JAHA," [data base online] (Johnstown Area Heritage Association) available from <http://www.jaha.org/contact.html>; Internet; accessed 15 February 2006.

Housed in the Johnstown Flood Museum site are the archivist, maintenance person, and part-time site manager.¹¹

Located in the renovated Carnegie Library, the Flood Museum was JAHA's first major success story. Since its renovation in 1989, the Flood Museum has not made any major changes to its exhibits or to its presentation of the story. The exhibit designs, along with the overall arrangement of the interior, were conceptualized by Metaform Incorporated for the renovation of the museum. Burkert has been reluctant to make any major changes to the exhibits because they were intended to be long-term, so they have a "timeless" quality to them. Also, the cost to design these exhibits was significant.¹²

Each floor of the Flood Museum contains three thousand square feet. Guests enter the building on the first floor through the gift shop. Various Johnstown paraphernalia fill the room. Visitors can purchase anything from books and magnets to blankets and pens. A reception desk is on the right. Here visitors can purchase items from the gift shop and their tickets to the museum. In 2006, tickets cost \$6 for adults, \$5 for seniors and \$4 for students. This price includes admission to the Heritage Discovery Center.¹³

On the wall to the entrance into the main exhibit area is an enlarged photograph of Johnstown before the flood on the left and on the right is a photograph of Johnstown after the flood. When visitors are ready to begin their tour of the museum, the tour

¹¹ Burkert, interview, 17 October 2005.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ "Admission & Hours," [data base online] (Johnstown Area Heritage Association) available from <http://www.jaha.org/FloodMuseum/hours.html>; Accessed 28 January 2006.

guide draws their attention to the photographs, pointing out structures that were destroyed or moved from their original locations.

The guide then shows visitors through the doorway into the main exhibit room. The entire back wall is covered with a life-size recreation of the debris from the flood, which shows the visitor what their surroundings might have looked like if they had been in the flood. Visitors are told about the flood as they approach the multimedia map in the center of the floor.

When it was created, the chevron-shaped model was expected to be the “largest single attraction in the exhibition space.” The dimensions are fifteen by twenty feet, and it is supported by four columns. The map depicts the terrain of Lake Conemaugh and the path of the flood down the valley to Johnstown and the surrounding areas. The model was to feature either light or mechanics to animate the path of the flood, so visitors could understand precisely what happened. Light was chosen as the most effective method.¹⁴

Self-guided tours are also permitted. The original plan called for the staff to inform the visitor of the twenty-five minute film that runs every thirty minutes.¹⁵ Visitors are advised to see the exhibits first while they are waiting for the next showing of the film.¹⁶ Metaform predicted that people would arrive at the museum in random fashion. So while visitors are waiting for the film to start, they can view exhibits on the

¹⁴ Metaform, Incorporated, *A Basic Concept for the Design of Exhibits in the Johnstown Flood Museum and the Inclined Plane Visitor Center* (Metaform, Inc., 1987), 14.

¹⁵ At its completion, the film ran twenty-six minutes. It is shown every hour.

¹⁶ Metaform, *Design of Exhibits*, 5.

flood. Large crowds were not expected at the museum, so the exhibits did not call for a restrictive traffic flow pattern.¹⁷

To the left is the elevator, which takes visitors the second floor to view the film. Above the elevator, a clock counts down the minutes to the next showing so self-guided visitors can spend their time on the first floor accordingly. Exhibits continuing along the wall to the left are in chronological order.

The exhibits focus on the following: “The City,” “The Dam,” and “The Flood” in the back left corner. Continuing along the wall to the right are “The Next Day,” “The Relief Effort,” “The World Reaction,” and “The Rebuilding.”¹⁸ Each exhibit includes at least a few of the following: audio-visual features, photographs, artifacts, graphics, and film presentations.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20-34.



Figure 9. Looking to the right, after entering the main exhibit room. Fiber optic map is to the left with debris wall behind it.

Photograph by author

Depending on the amount of time before the next showing of the film, the guide may give a tour of the Oklahoma House. This addition was made to the museum in 2000. The Oklahoma House is an example of a prefabricated house, manufactured for the Oklahoma Territory. These structures were one-and-half stories tall and could be purchased in two sizes: 10x20 feet or 16x24 feet. The Oklahoma House was one of the first available forms of shelter for survivors who had been left homeless by the flood. Oklahoma Houses were not suitable for the harsh winter conditions of Southwestern Pennsylvania.

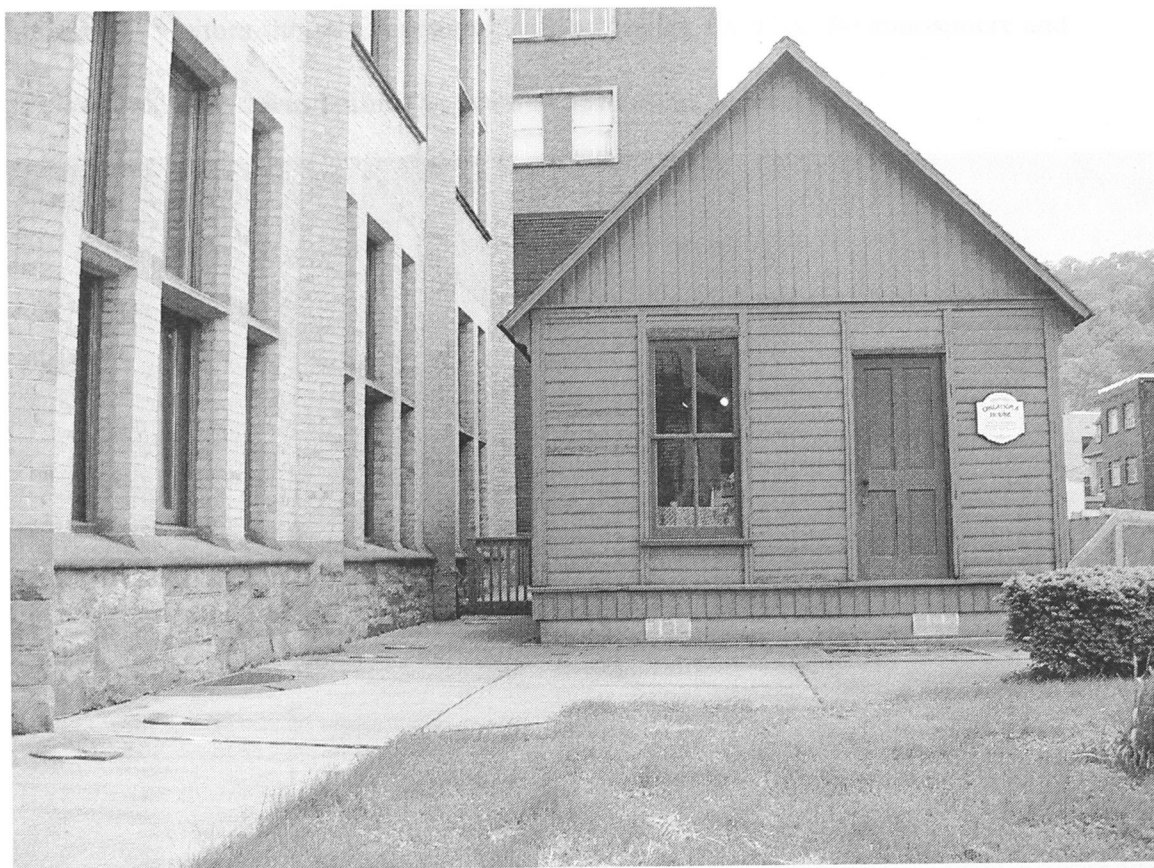


Figure 10. Oklahoma House.

Photograph by author

The house was discovered in Johnstown when the one next to it was selected for restoration by Habitat for Humanity. When Habitat became aware of the structure's historical significance, it was donated to JAHA. The Oklahoma House was renovated and placed on the back patio of the museum.²⁰

When it is time to view the film, visitors exit the elevator on the second floor to find a photo gallery along the wall where the entrance for the theater is located. Reproductions of photographs, newspaper clippings, posters, and various other archival materials portray the people of Johnstown, their clubs, organizations, families, and

²⁰ "Virtual Tour," [data base online] (Johnstown Area Heritage Association) available from <http://www.jaha.org/FloodMuseum/oklahoma.html>; Internet; accessed 29 January 2006.

buildings. Visitors should come away with a “feeling for what the atmosphere and spirit of Johnstown was before the flood in 1889.”²¹

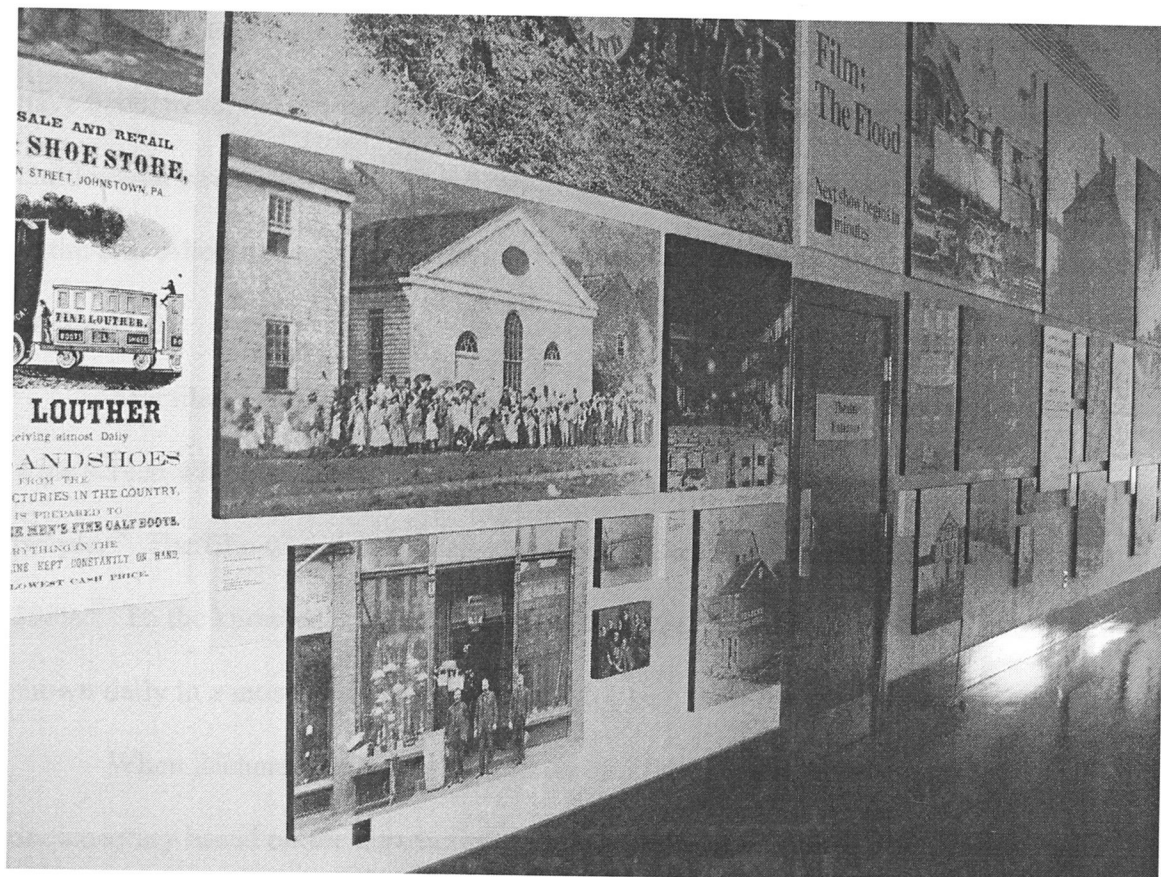


Figure 11. Photographs on entrance wall of the theater.

Photograph by author

Also on the second floor is the work room, where the staff can take lunch breaks, make photocopies, and do paperwork. Across the hall from the entrance to the theater is the archive room. Visitors can see through the room's glass walls from the hallway, but must have the permission and supervision of the staff to enter. A spiral

²¹ Metaform., *Design of Exhibits*, 70.

staircase in this room leads to storage on the third floor. Most of the artifacts from the flood are housed in this room, along with the majority of the documents from JAHA.²²

Artifacts at the Flood Museum consist mainly of everyday items that would not have been preserved but for the flood. Items such as the clothing of a working class child would have normally been cut into rags, but now they provide excellent references to the era. About ten percent or fewer of the artifacts owned by the Flood Museum are on display.²³

The film, produced by Charles Guggenheim, is shown on a ten by eighteen-foot wide screen with thirty-five millimeter projection. The theatre seats seventy-seven people.²⁴ The film won the Academy Award for Best Documentary, Short Subject in 1989.²⁵ To the knowledge of the museum employees, "it's the only Oscar winner being shown daily in a museum in the country."²⁶

When Richard Burkert embarked on the film project, he envisioned a documentary based on the destruction and recovery in Johnstown. But the film ended up focusing more on the recovery and the spirit of the period after the flood. Guggenheim wanted it to be more emotionally engaging than the exhibits; not heavy handed, but a work of art. He wanted people to draw their own conclusions. Guggenheim's 1960's liberal perspective used the people on the mountain and the

²² Dan Ingram, Curator, Johnstown Area Heritage Association, interview by author, notes, telephone, 17 March 2006.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Metaform., *Design of Exhibits*, 37.

²⁵ "Virtual Tour," [data base online] (Johnstown Area Heritage Association) available from <http://www.jaha.org/FloodMuseum/oklahoma.html>; Internet; accessed 29 January 2006.

²⁶ "Local Lures: Out-of-towners flock to city's historical sites." *Johnstown Tribune-Democrat*, Sunday, July 24, 2005.

people in the valley as a metaphor for America. The film exposes the “nature of great wealth in a democracy, and the tensions this creates.”

Guggenheim made the film he wanted to make, despite all of his negotiations with Burkert. Burkert explained that it is “hard to tell an artist what to do.” And it was difficult to surrender a half million dollars along with the story of the flood to a filmmaker. But the personal experiences visitors have viewing the film make Burkert feel that “it worked out well in the end.”²⁷

Another photo gallery was erected for visitors to view upon exiting the theater. The walls are filled with photographs of the people, clubs, organizations, and diverse community of Johnstown in 1989.²⁸ The executive director has been asked numerous times if he has plans to update the photographs. Even though they are outdated, Burkert feels that the pictures from the centennial add a nice touch; they show the visitor a hundred years of progress in Johnstown.²⁹ Metaform’s layout is still effective seventeen years after its conception.

²⁷ Burkert, interview, 8 May 2006.

²⁸ Metaform, *Design of Exhibits*, 70-71.

²⁹ Burkert, interview, 17 October 2005.



Figure 12. Photographs on walls outside the theater.

Photograph by author

Prior to 2005, visitors could travel to the third floor to view the Victorian stereo photographs in the form of a slide show. The guide gave a presentation while visitors viewed the pictures with three-dimensional glasses. Unfortunately the machine died and has not been replaced. Visitors can still go to the third floor to view pictures of the flood that are on the walls, but the area will soon be off limits. The Heritage Discovery Center is using the space for storage during the renovations to the Children's Museum. Plans for the space after the renovations have not been made.³⁰

³⁰ Renee Daly, Assistant Sites Manager, Johnstown Area Heritage Association, interview by author, notes, telephone, 9 May 2006.

When visitors are finished at the museum, they can either take the elevator back to the first floor, or walk down the staircases, which are lined with more photographs. The Flood Museum appropriately displays images from the 1936 and the 1977 floods.

Despite the timeless qualities of the exhibits designed by Metaform, JAHA has plans to make some changes in the next few years. Technological obstacles are making many of the exhibits in the Flood Museum obsolete. A few modifications to the existing exhibits will give the museum a more modern appeal.³¹

But the most striking feature of the museum is the building itself. The architecture of the building and the story behind it give the museum a touch of irony. Visitors are intrigued when they learn that one of the members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club rebuilt the library destroyed in the flood that now houses a museum which tells that very story.

As JAHA looks to the future, the hope is to link all the history museums and historic sites located in the neighboring National Historic District. JAHA calls this project the Johnstown Discovery Network. For over ten years, JAHA has been using this project to position Johnstown as a heritage tourism destination. The hope is for the Discovery Network to contribute to the revitalization Johnstown. The Flood Museum is a key component of the project.³²

While critics may accuse the Johnstown Flood Museum of having a bias because of its local connections, it is ideal for a visitor looking for an emotional experience. The

³¹ *Ibid.*, 13 February 2006

³² "Long-Range JAHA Plans," [data base online] (Johnstown Area Heritage Association) available from <http://www.jaha.org/AboutJaha/Longrange.html>; Internet; accessed 16 March 2006.

exhibits, the film, and the employees engage the visitors on the controversial aspect of the flood, yet allow them the freedom to form their own opinions.

The Carnegie Library provides an appropriate venue for such an undertaking. Visitors are taken back in time by the architecture and the story of the building's construction. They can consider how the victims of the flood might have felt to have their library rebuilt by one of the club members. And while the artifacts and the tour guides' thoughts can affect visitors, the film is the highlight of the experience at the museum.

The Flood Museum reacts to the story much as Americans did when they first learned of the disaster: they condemned the club members on the basis of their understanding of what was going on in America. After a visit to the museum, visitors will find that the bias the museum possesses because of its location and inherent tie to the victims may provide for the most rewarding experience. The connection between the museum and the community drives employees to represent the victims by telling the story as accurately as possible.

Chapter 7

Two Interpretations

In preparation for the centennial, each site agreed to concentrate its efforts on specific aspects of the flood, which made a more complete interpretation of the event possible. The Flood Memorial would present the history of the club and the dam, the breaking of the dam, and the factors that led to its failure. The story of the destruction and rehabilitation would be left primarily to the Flood Museum.

While each museum focused on different parts of the story, differences in the interpretation of the role that the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club played in the disaster became prominent. This is an important distinction between the sites. It is a distinction that not only is necessary, but it “lends itself to the story.” According to Randy Cooley, the Park Service tries to present facts without attempting to assess motive. The Flood Museum interprets the feelings of the people. The Park Service can afford to be objective, to tell a national story from a national perspective. The Flood Museum tells a local story with local feeling. “That is the power of it.”¹

The Flood Memorial refrains from blaming the club. Before the memorial opened, employees searched for evidence that the club members were aware of the condition of the dam. They argue that it simply does not exist. “In order to be insensitive, you have to be aware of it in the first place,” says Cooley. The Park Service searched for information about the Pittsburghers that suggested that they were conscious

¹ Randall Cooley, Superintendent, Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site and Johnstown Flood National Memorial, 1981-1987, interview by author, notes, telephone, 2 February 2006.

of the consequences of their actions. “Today we think they are selfish, [but] it was class structure” that was to blame.²

Mary Ann Davis is a Park Ranger at the Flood Memorial. She agrees that the Park Rangers do their best to be objective. “People want to walk out [of the memorial] with closure; people want it to be black and white.” They comfort themselves by separating themselves from the rich people at the dam. But Davis reminds the visitors that the club members were people too, and much of what they did, or failed to do, was due to human nature. She asks visitors, “If you join a country club, do you run around doing inspections?”

Davis is constantly reminded of her enormous responsibility to the visitors. No documentation proves that the Pittsburghers knew there was a problem with the dam. She does not insinuate to visitors that the Pittsburghers knew about the dam’s condition, or that its failure was their fault, because there is no proof. “We deliberate extensively over what to tell visitors. Maybe they are guilty, but we can’t prove it. We couldn’t prove it in a court of law.” Davis has learned to embrace the mystery of the story.³

The interpretation of the flood at the memorial and the relationship it has with the Flood Museum can be attributed to the management. The Flood Memorial has seen many supervisors come and go. Mary Ann Davis has been a Park Ranger at the Flood Memorial since September 24, 1989. She has seen the administration go through much

² *Ibid.* This statement implies that the wealthy club members were above the law.

³ Mary Ann Davis, Park Ranger, Johnstown National Flood Memorial, interview by author, notes, telephone, 15 February 2006.

change in seventeen years. Frequent changes in the administration have the potential to put a strain on the relationship between the sites.

Pete Neigh was hired as the superintendent of the Flood Memorial in 1987. The NPS still wanted to have someone watching specifically over the Flood Memorial to make sure that the new installations ran smoothly, instead of running the management out of the Allegheny Portage Railroad NHS. Connie Rudd succeeded Bundy as site manager in 1989. This would be the last time an actual site manager was hired, and the superintendent of the Flood Memorial and the Allegheny Portage Railroad assumed those responsibilities. Davis also witnessed the hiring of three more superintendents in her time at the Flood Memorial: Marilyn Parris, Joann Handly, and Keith Newland.⁴

Marilyn Parris succeeded Pete Neigh as superintendent in 1993 and stayed for three years. In her last year, the NPS decided to create another version of the Western Pennsylvania Group. Keith Newland was hired to manage the Flood Memorial and Fort Necessity. In 1997, Joann Handly replaced Maryland Parris. But after the 9/11 attacks on the United States in 2001, Handly was sent to manage the Flight 93 site in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The Western Pennsylvania Group was dissolved once again, and Keith Newland became the superintendent of the Allegheny Portage Railroad NHS and the Johnstown Flood National Memorial. He is the current superintendent.⁵

Even through all of the changes in the management, the memorial has maintained consistent objectives. Most of the guides at the Flood Memorial are full-time professional interpreters, not volunteers. They follow the long-range interpretive plans

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Cooley, interview, 24 February 2006.

that are established by the Park Service. And, despite David McCullough's sympathetic tone toward the victims, guides frequently cite his text. Davis likes to quote the line in his book that explains how the country assumed that people in positions of responsibility were acting responsibly.⁶

The Flood Memorial was created as a memorial to the flood victims and to preserve the remnants of the lake, the dam, and some of the cottages and clubhouse. It presents the facts of the event. Federal employees work at the site. They are outsiders to the story and they present the material accordingly. But many features of the site may be more suitable for educated adults, and the interpretation may be difficult for even them to grasp.

Employees boast an objective presentation of the event because they are removed from the community. Their resource is the club. But to many visitors, the site does not stand on the middle ground. It is clear that the Flood Memorial is attempting to cover "the untold story" by presenting the disaster from another angle: the club's angle. But the research on the subject clearly shows that the evidence was not in favor of the club.⁷

Many employees claim that today, the club members would not be found guilty in a court of law. They blame class structure for the disaster and argue that there is no proof that the members of the club were aware of the condition of the dam. But there is also no evidence to prove that they were not informed. Since Carnegie did not explicitly state in

⁶ Davis, interview, 15 February 2006.

⁷ It is ironic that many of the park rangers are fond of McCullough's book, which makes a strong case against the club. Employees use the quote "The members of the club and most of Johnstown went along with the assumption that the people who were responsible for their safety were behaving responsibly," to interpret two different ideas. McCullough, *Johnstown Flood*, 262-263.

his diary that he knew the dam was not safe, can he be absolved of responsibility for the disaster? Because there is no motive in the record, the site does not present one.

Since the Flood Memorial exists more to help visitors understand the story from the viewpoint of the club than as a memorial, perhaps the site's name should be changed. A true memorial to the victims would not show a morbid film on the deaths in Johnstown or seemingly side with the members of the club. A true memorial would celebrate the lives lost in the tragedy by telling their story.

Frequent changes in the management at the Flood Memorial have required the staffs of both sites to adjust to new personalities and policies. But the consistency of the Flood Museum's management has prevented serious setbacks in the museum's relationship with the Flood Memorial and with the community. Frequent changes in the administration of any museum can be harmful to its success. A non-profit organization is particularly dependent on the community surrounding it. If the museum did not have the community's support, the organization would be virtually impossible to sustain.

The Flood Museum does not convey the same message as the Flood Memorial. The museum is on the hallowed ground of the flood, so there is more of a connection to the destruction and enormous loss of life. Employees at the site are not shy about telling the controversial aspects of the story. Tour guides at the museum are periodically trained, mainly with lectures and discussions. As new guides are brought in they are

paired with experienced guides. But even while the interpretation of the story is left to each employee's discretion, there are some striking similarities.⁸

Richard Burkert has been upholding the same tradition for the museum since 1979. When asked how he handles the subject matter in the sites he oversees, he claimed that he does not back away from controversy. The Johnstown Flood had a major impact on liability reform. The flood was a major scandal. By today's standards, the Pittsburghers were responsible for the disaster. This raises the question, "can you have a democracy when there are wealthy men above the law?" The Johnstown Flood Museum conveys his sentiment.⁹

The curator, Dan Ingram, conveys a similar position. He is pretty certain that the club members would be held responsible if the incident were to happen today. Ingram made reference to the flooding in Louisiana as a result of Hurricane Katrina. The victims started filing suits over the breach of the levies only months afterward. Today people sue over hot coffee. There would surely be successful litigation over the miserable condition of the South Fork Dam.¹⁰

Pat Esserman has been volunteering her time at the Flood Museum for over ten years. Esserman's great-grandmother and her great grandmother's three children were killed in the 1889 Flood. She feels a sense of duty to tell the story; she does so with passion and conviction.

⁸ Dan Ingram, Curator, Johnstown Area Heritage Association, interview by author, notes, telephone, 17 March 2006.

⁹ Richard Burkert, Executive Director, Johnstown Area Heritage Association, interview by author, notes, Johnstown, PA, 17 October 2005.

¹⁰ Ingram, interview, 17 March 2006.

As a tour guide, she has the tremendous responsibility of educating the public about the flood. Esserman, along with the other employees at the Flood Museum, bases her interpretation of the flood on McCullough's book. Esserman feels that McCullough is a pragmatic man, and that impression comes through in his interpretation of the flood. She refers to his book frequently during tours of the museum. The book's index makes it easy to answer patrons' questions.

Esserman's personal feelings are evident when she answers questions about the town and the flood. When asked about liability, she says that if today's legal environment had existed in 1889, litigation would have begun when the first drop of water fell on Johnstown. The dam was "a disaster waiting to happen." When asked why the people of Johnstown did not move after all of the floods and unemployment, she spoke of the traditions in Johnstown. She said that "we try to be as safe as we can...people are ever hopeful."¹¹

One of the most important tasks of the tour guide is to remind visitors of the period. Esserman noted that many people in 1889 had the misconception that the rich were knowledgeable. After the flood many were quick to label the event "an act of God." She summarized the event by paraphrasing McCullough: we cannot "expect people in [positions of] responsibility to act responsibly."¹²

As a volunteer, Esserman understands the challenges that face the independent museum. She makes every effort to contribute positively to the visitors' experience in

¹¹ Pat Esserman, Docent, Johnstown Flood Museum, interview by author, notes, telephone, 1 February 2006.

¹² *Ibid.*

the hope that they will come back. She is also aware of the differences between the Flood Museum and the Flood Memorial. It is no secret that the Flood Museum tells the story from Johnstown's point of view. Telling the story in two different ways allows people to draw their own conclusions.¹³

To some visitors, the Flood Museum may seem too quick to point fingers at the culprits in the disaster. The employees at this site represent the victims. In fact, some of the employees' ancestors were affected by the flood. Visitors may conclude that the connection employees have with the victims and the location of the site cause the story to be told in a biased, unprofessional manner.

There is no sympathy for the club. The tour guides express a sense of resentment that justice was not served. The club's carelessness, they suggest, caused the destruction of an entire town. Numerous engineering reports cited the faulty construction, and correspondence between Morrell and Ruff proved Ruff's disregard for the safety of the people of Johnstown. Even though both Ruff and Morrell had died years prior to the flood, and no existing documentation proves that the wealthy club members were aware of the condition of the dam, the Flood Museum concludes that the dam was the Pittsburghers' responsibility. And they failed miserably.

The film also expresses this sentiment. Viewers are made aware of the elaborate lifestyles of the club members and the alterations made to the dam for their pleasure, such as lowering the breast of the dam for carriages to cross and placing screens over the

¹³ *Ibid.*

spillways to prevent imported fish from traveling downstream. The film does not avoid the controversial aspects of the disaster.

The museum also has numerous artifacts on display, such as working-class children's clothing, newspaper articles of the flood, and everyday items of the era, which allow the visitor to step back in time to feel what it might have felt like to experience the flood. When visitors begin to feel like the victims, they are more likely to look to the causes of the disaster. They can easily separate themselves from the wealthy Pittsburghers and wonder how they could have ever been so careless.

If visitors are prepared to confront the controversial aspects of the disaster, then the Flood Museum may be just what they are looking for. When visitors leave this site, they too will hold resentment towards the club members. They will feel angry that no one was held responsible for the deaths of so many people. If visitors prefer to remain outsiders to the story or they can understand the club members' situation, they may feel more comfortable at the Flood Memorial.

Even though there are distinct differences between the sites, they benefit from the relationship that was formed by the cooperation agreement. It is a rather unusual situation for a law to mandate a cooperative agreement between a private, non-profit site and a National Park. Cooperation is nowhere near what it was in and around 1989, but the sites still try to take advantage of this relationship as much as they can.

The sites collaborate on programming, such as the anniversary celebrations and joint marketing schemes, and they even share employees. For example, the curator for JAHA, Dan Ingram, has helped the Flood Memorial with curatorial work and reports.

Employees from the Flood Memorial have done the same for the Flood Museum.¹⁴ The gift shops at both sites work closely together, and the sites have worked together on evening lantern tours of St. Michael since 1999.¹⁵

Visitors are encouraged to visit both sites because employees are aware of the impact two perspectives can have on the story. The biggest challenge for public historians is putting the persons involved in the context of the period in which the event took place. It is difficult to take a visitor's twenty-first-century perspective of motive and adjust it to the nineteenth century. Employees at both sites struggle with this concept every day.¹⁶

But getting visitors to understand a nineteenth-century mindset is not the only challenge facing the two flood sites. Having two different ways to look at an event in history may make visitors feel uncomfortable. How can there be two right ways to tell the same story? When the visitors tour each site, they may be inclined to choose the site they feel is accurately telling the story.

Whether one method of interpretation is better than the other is a matter of opinion. The important thing to remember is that the differences between the sites allow visitors to draw their own conclusions about the causes of the flood, while being educated about the study of history. The flood story, like many other stories in history, is not black and white. History can be told in many different ways.

¹⁴ Ingram, interview, 17 March 2006.

¹⁵ Doug Richardson, Park Ranger/Interpreter, Johnstown National Flood Memorial, interview by author, notes, St. Michael, PA, 3 March 2006.

¹⁶ Cooley, interview, 2 February 2006.

Conclusion:

A Distinction That “Lends Itself to the Story”

There are many questions that remain unanswered about that fateful day, especially regarding the subject of liability. Historians have long questioned the events that led up to the flood. They have nonetheless come to the consensus that the club members were to blame. But as with many stories in history, there are many perspectives to be taken.

The Flood Museum presents the consensus. It is located on the site of the destruction, appropriately sympathizing with the victims. But the Flood Memorial prides itself in taking the uncharted course. It takes an outsider’s perspective, and questions the consensus. Each museum is doing its job if it allows the visitors to formulate their own questions and attempt to answer them with the material presented in the museums.

Having two sites is worthwhile to the story of the flood. The story is controversial, so it benefits from having two perspectives. One could argue that each site has its own biases, but these are hard to avoid when presenting any topic. Even though employees at each site may feel that its method of interpretation is more effective than the other, they both serve different purposes. Thus each site is no better than the other, they are just different.

What is important to understand when visiting each site is that while they cooperate with each other, there are stark differences. Despite these differences, one thing that employees agree on is the importance of preserving the story of the Johnstown

Flood. Employees at each site are well aware of the role they play in the history of Johnstown.

The story of the Johnstown Flood should be told because it is part of the city's heritage and a major event in American history. But it should also be told because it is potentially important to the economy of Johnstown. A tourist-based economy in Johnstown could help fill the void left by the departure of the steel mills. City officials began to realize that there was potential to attract tourist dollars by promoting the town's history when plans for the museums were in their infancy. The Museum Association used this idea to convince the town to contribute to the cause. But town leaders could only speculate the benefits that could be realized.

According to Lee Iacocca,

There is probably no place in America that has gone through what the people of Johnstown have: three major floods, its major industries on the ropes, for many years the highest unemployment rate in the nation. The story of Johnstown and its people ...[is] a story of courage, and determination and pride. And it's a lesson for all Americans.¹

This lesson can be taught to Johnstown's citizens and tourists through interpretive programs, festivals, and commemorations. Historic preservation and museums provide a popular, although not entirely successful, method of revitalization. A town's history can be seen as an approach to economic development, but the residents must be convinced first. "In Johnstown, you could look at the river banks encased in concrete and say, 'My God, how awful. How can we live like this?' On the other hand, you could ask, "How

¹ *Ibid.*, 8-9. Iacocca's father emigrated from Italy in 1902, and was sent to work in the coal mines of western Pennsylvania. He only lasted one day in Johnstown, before he ran away to Allentown.

many towns have rivers encased in concrete? How can we use this to create a special sense of place?”²

The Johnstown Flood Museum and the Johnstown National Flood Memorial are important to Johnstown’s legacy. While the threat of another major flood no longer concerns residents, floods will always remain a part of the city’s heritage. The flood sites have become a part of Johnstown’s landscape. They have set an example of how history can bring visitors to the area and restore pride in the residents.

And visitors and residents alike will have learned an important lesson from the sites, perhaps without even realizing it. The study of history is biased, and story tellers do have objectives. Visitors to these sites have to weigh the information they are given and draw their own conclusions about the causes of the Johnstown Flood of 1889.

² *Ibid.*, 151-152, 157.

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