



One of the Worst Tragedies in American History:

The Great Johnstown Flood Of 1889

It began with a series of human errors and resulted in a chilling tragedy. A dam that held back 4.8 billion gallons of water burst, and the manmade river it created was released in one huge rush of incredible force. It surged 14 miles downstream into Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and destroyed everything in its path. Read the amazing story of the great deluge of 1889 and how it affected America for decades to come.

May 31, 1889

The streets of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, are filling with excess rainwater. No one is particularly alarmed, though. The local vendors begin moving their wares to second-story locations so that they should not be ruined by the water. Some homeowners move their furniture, clothes and other possessions to higher ground as well. Everyone works calmly as they take precautions to limit damage in case of a flood.

In fact, the warnings and alerts are pouring in fast. Telegrams reach the town's telegraph station from the South Fork Dam, 40 miles up in the mountains, warning that the river is overflowing at breakneck speed. The dam shows signs of instability and can give way at any second. When the noontime train makes its regular route through town, the engineer shouts a warning to the crowds as he passes: "Run for your lives! The dam is about to break!"

Few listeners do more than nod their heads in response, however. The telegraph dispatches are not even relayed to the local authorities. The locals are used to hearing dire warnings of imminent disaster and have become inured to them.

"They're always trying to scare us, and nothing has ever happened."

"If we were to believe all these announcements, the dam would have broken 10 years ago!"



Flooding is an annual event in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

After so many previous incidents of crying wolf, nobody stops to consider that perhaps this time the warnings are true.

Nor does the water beginning to flood the town streets arouse much alarm. At least once a year, the town is subjected to moderate flooding after heavy rain. The rain has been unusually heavy the past few days, so of course the streets would be somewhat flooded by the water.

As a consequence, 2,000 people continue going about their daily activities, happily oblivious to the imminent danger about to literally inundate them and their lives.

The Flood

At 4:07 PM, in the midst of the cold, wet day, the residents of Johnstown are startled by a thunderous noise that grows louder with each passing second. Few of those who hear the frightening commotion grasp what is happening.

After days of heavy rain, the water begins to flow over the South Fork Dam. Weakened by recent, poorly conceived changes made to its construction, the dam succumbs to the overwhelming weight of 20 million tons of water. As the rocks of the dam crumble, the water rushes down the narrow gorge below until it bursts onto Johnstown with an explosive force rivaling that of Niagara Falls.

Most of the townspeople see nothing until the 75-foot-high surging wave of water and debris approaches them, closing in at a speed of 40 MPH. Nothing can withstand the force of the ferocious floodwaters. Huge trees are uprooted as though they were matchsticks. Homes are smashed like eggshells, and locomotives are tossed around like toys.

The massive wall of water is accompanied by large plumes of smoke and steam that clouds the air and make it impossible to see. Survivors will refer to this as the "death fog." The thousands who try to flee on foot are hampered by the four to ten feet of rain that covered parts of the town even before the dam broke.

One eyewitness watches the entire

incident from a safe vantage point in the mountains above Johnstown. From his view, he sees the streets suddenly turn dark with figures rushing to escape.

Everyone heads for the safety of higher ground in the nearby hills. Very few, though, are fortunate enough to outrun the rush of the floodwaters and avoid being swept up by the angry river. Those who do not make it are caught up in a swift river of brown, oily water. Many are crushed by the deadly debris that churns in the water. Some manage to save themselves by climbing onto the flotsam as it swirls around.

To make matters worse, on its way downstream, the river sweeps through a factory that produces barbed wire and then rushes on while carrying huge rolls of the sharp wire with it. Many people become hopelessly entangled in barbed wire and are unable to free themselves in time to prevent drowning.

People who are still home when the deluge arrives dash to the roof. However, most of the houses are swept away by the rushing water and become part of debris that the river drags along with it in its mad rush. Nor do the better-built stone houses of Johnstown's wealthier residents offer any greater measure of protection. The walls quickly capitulate in the face of the terrific onslaught, and their stones topple over, killing the occupants.

From every side come shrieks of terror and pleas for help as the desperate residents try to rescue themselves from the sudden horror. People climb tall poles or to the roofs of homes or train cars to escape the ever-rising floodwaters. It takes tremendous stamina to maintain a grip while climbing as the heavy waves bend the poles back and forth, threatening to throw those clinging to them into the clutches of the merciless river below.

The South Fork Dam

In 1889, Johnstown was occupied mainly by families of German and Welsh descent. It had been founded in 1794 by a Swiss



A building that survived with relatively little damage.

immigrant named Joseph Schantz and was located in the narrow valley between the peaks of the Allegheny Mountains, approximately 60 miles east of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Johnstown was poorly situated. It sat alongside a river that swelled each spring from the excess runoff of the melting snow in the nearby mountains. That meant that flooding was a regular part of city life. When the city underwent a growth spurt during the 1880s, conditions worsened. The expanding population meant that more and more trees from the nearby mountainsides were cut to provide homes and fuel for the growing number of residents. Thinning the forests caused even more of the melting snows to reach the city. Also, the crowding led some people to build their homes closer to the riverbanks, increasing the danger each time the river would rise.

Nevertheless, Johnstown continued to attract more families because it offered great job opportunities. An industrialized city, it boasted several iron and steel works. The largest of these was Cambria, where