A DOCUMENT ON THE SECOND JOHNSTOWN FLOOD

By Dale H. Custer*

The Johnstown flood of 1889 is one of the most famous of American disasters. Less well known is the second Johnstown flood of forty-seven years later. The flood of 1936 fortunately took few lives, but its property damage was only slightly less than the toll of 1889.

Negligence was the cause of the first Johnstown flood. Members of the Conemaugh Lake Fishing Club had repeatedly warned authorities of the danger that the lake was liable to burst its bounds under the pressure of the heavy spring watershed. On May 31, 1889, this very thing occurred, leaving the town helpless under a wall of thundering water. The flood waters left 2,200 people dead, with 967 bodies never recovered.

The spring of 1936 produced many of the same conditions. A sudden thaw was followed by unusually heavy rains which fell all over Pennsylvania. The result was Johnstown's second serious flood.

Although few persons are still alive who were adults in 1889, the 1936 flood is still a part of the talk of the town. Events are dated as "before the flood" or "just a year after." Youngsters inherit the story from their elders. Families moving to Johnstown from other parts of the country are told what happened by eye witnesses and soon accept the flood as part of their background.

Any citizen who experienced the '36 flood will tell you that he will never forget it. One of these is Howard M. Custer, 1750 Sunshine Avenue, Johnstown, who at that time was employed by the Mineral Point Coal Company, with offices on the sixth floor of the First National Bank Building at the corner of Main and Franklin Streets, in the very heart of downtown Johnstown. As it turned

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Looking across Central Park from the steps of the Johnstown Tribune Building. The First National Bank Building in the background is where Howard M. Cusser and many others were trapped during the flood. The streetcar in the foreground is where the six men were trapped. Flood waters at their highest point covered McCrory's sign at right. Note the cannon mentioned in the article.

Photographs from the author's collection.
out, Mr. Custer had one of the best possible views of that frightening but dramatic day and night.

Mr. Custer's story of the flood starts with noon on March 17. His story is taken from notes written as he observed the flooding from his excellent vantage point:

"About noon we heard rumors of the river rising to exceptional heights, and at 1:30 p.m. I walked over to the Franklin St. Bridge, and saw that the water at that time was overlapping the banks at many points. Stonycreek St. which parallels the river, and Vine St., near the Y.M.C.A., a low point only a few blocks from the river, were quite flooded.

"I returned to the office a half an hour later, and by that time automobiles were unable to travel over that portion of Main St. at City Hall, the Fort Stanwix Hotel and points below toward the river. Traffic on Franklin St. was stopped in front of the United States National Bank. Drivers were being forced to abandon their cars. Also, many motorists were having difficulty getting through the junction of Main, Bedford and Clinton streets. The water was backing up Main St. to Franklin St. and coming down from Bedford St. Soon all of Franklin St. was covered with the exception of the corner of Franklin and Washington streets which seemed to be a high point. All of Main and Locust streets were covered, and the only two points not under water were the old Baltimore and Ohio Station and Central Park.

"By this time most of the populace were excited. People were hurrying out of the downtown area. Like many of the other office workers, I chose to stick it out, feeling certain that the waters would soon start to recede. I convinced myself that by five o'clock things would be back to normal."

Unfortunately, Mr. Custer's belief that the rising waters were only a temporary condition proved erroneous, although it was a feeling shared by many Johnstowners at the time. The flood waters that began to overlap the banks of the Stonycreek and Little Conemaugh rivers shortly after noon on March 17 continued to rise throughout the day, reaching the highest point between 7:00 and 10:00 p.m.; they did not completely recede until after 10:00 a.m. on March 18.

To continue Mr. Custer's diary:

"Gradually the water rose until Central Park and every point
A scene on Washington Street after the water receded.

viewable from the twelfth floor of our building was inundated, with Franklin St., Main St. and Locust St. becoming raging torrents sweeping down across Central Park. We could distinctly see the rise of the water as it mounted the steps of the Father John’s Memorial in the park. We could measure the rise by watching the cannon at the Main and Franklin entrance to Central Park, and before dark it could no longer be seen.

“Late in the afternoon we realized that we were trapped in the building! I telephoned my wife, told her of the situation, and urged her not to worry, although I must admit that by that time, I was pretty worried myself.

“Some time before dark, the occupants of the drug store on the corner of Main and Franklin streets across from my offices finally deserted their posts, after remaining in the store until the water reached a dangerous height, above their waists, almost shoulder high. Five or six pianos floated across Main St. and Central Park from the Porch Brothers Piano Store at the corner of Vine and Franklin. By this time, six men, realizing their dangerous position in a stranded streetcar in front of our building,
were shouting to be taken off. Only a few hours earlier after the rising water had halted the streetcar, they seemed to feel the situation was very funny because we could see them smiling and joking from our office window. Later, after the water forced them to sit on the backs of their seats, they continued laughing, although their spirits had become dampened along with their clothing. Still later, when they were forced to seek refuge on the roof of the car, they realized their situation was desperate.

"An extension of fire hose from the building was thrown to them, and they came into the building hand over hand, with one man nearly being swept away by the strong current. A dental assistant, who worked in our building, had stripped off his white uniform and stood on the windowsill, ready to dive in the murky water in the event any man lost his grip on the hose. Most of the confectionery from the cigar counter on the first floor had been taken upstairs much earlier, and the secretaries from the different offices in the building prepared coffee to drink with it.

"Perhaps a little of the scene from the twelfth floor just before dark may give an idea of the spread of the water: All of downtown Johnstown was under water with the current moving very rapidly through the city. All kinds of debris were being washed down from the Kernville and Baumer St. area and the Bethlehem Steel Works. The rise of the water was just short of the second floor windows on Somerset St. Automobiles were covered with water on Main St., and some were being moved about and smashed by the strong current.

"By 7 p.m. all means of communication had been cut off, and the power was off all over town. Fortunately we had emergency gas lights in the building that we were able to use. All railroad traffic was stopped, and we had not seen any trains moving for hours. Flashlights could be seen inside the darkened buildings. People had been left stranded all over town. There were about one hundred people in our building, and we could see many more in Glosser's Store and the United States Bank Building. All buildings that had less than three floors were vacant.

"Many people were taking serious chances in order to get home, as in one case where a man with a child on his shoulders, and a woman were trying to ford upper Franklin St. with the water nearly to their shoulders and the current almost impossible to get
A scene on upper Main Street on the outer finge of the flood damaged area. The entire ground floor of Swank's Store was devastated by flood water.

through. We were all greatly relieved when they made it safely into one of the buildings. We heard that a friend of one of the secretaries in our building was able to get a call through to the Home Loan Office, and she said the Pittsburgh papers were running extras claiming that the Quemahoning Dam was in danger of breaking. If this had happened the situation would have become much more serious. It later proved to be only a rumor.

"Because of our isolated position, we were keenly interested in the rise of the water and naturally were wondering when it would start to recede. Early in the evening a heavy downpour had started. We could hear the swirl and the rush of the water, but the night was so dark we could see nothing except the lights of cars moving on the Frankstown and Prospect hills, the flashlights in the surrounding buildings and distant lights in the mills at Franklin. We were also able to recognize the lights of the Incline at the top of the Westmont Hill through the driving rain. Evidently the Bethlehem Steel Company was able to keep its power house going because the top floor of the Bethlehem General Office Building was lighted.
Washington Street looking towards the Point Stadium. This section was one of the first to be flooded. Note the receding waters at the left, the overturned car in the foreground, and the washed out lower story of the building in the foreground.

"Before the phone service went out, we were told that the Ferndale Bridge had collapsed, and before dark the giant glass display case from the Foster’s Store entrance at the corner of Main and Bedford came floating down Main St. At 1:30 a.m. Wednesday, it was reported that the water had receded six inches after reaching half way to the second floor of our building. I knew the damage would be very high because there was not a store or dwelling in the downtown area the water had not reached. Moxham, Hornerstown, Kernville, Cambria City, Coopersdale, Morrellville, and the lower sections of Ferndale were all flooded, not to mention on up the Conemaugh Valley and some sections of Somerset County.

"Shortly after 1:00 a.m. I joined the other men in our office playing poker. It helped to get our minds off the flood. By 3:00 a.m. the emergency gas lights were exhausted and interrupted our card game. We tried to get some sleep by rolling ourselves in the rugs. We finally welcomed the dawn, sleepy, cold and hungry."
“The daylight showed the terrible devastation all over the city as we viewed the damage from the roof of the building. At that time we noticed the utility wires shaking violently, and men in the buildings across the street shouted that the Franklin St. Bridge had collapsed, even though the water had started to recede much earlier, first slowly, then rapidly. The governor’s plane droned overhead. No one could comprehend the amount of water or the extensive damage without viewing the scene for themselves.

“We watched a small boat being paddled up Main St. The boat carried camera equipment and three newspapermen. They were having much difficulty in the strong current, and the boat finally capsized. We could not help but laugh as they struggled through the current and were helped into our building, soaked to the skin. By 6:45 a.m. the water was still too high for cars to get through, but we could see trucks taking people from various buildings around the city. We eagerly awaited our removal and breakfast.”

By noon of March 18 the flood waters had completely disappeared, leaving behind them only the terrible wreckage they had caused. Johnstown attributed twenty-seven deaths to the flood. A few years later the Roosevelt administration secured an appropriation of sufficient money to make the city of Johnstown flood-free. The rivers were channelled, and giant concrete river walls were built to make flooding virtually impossible. Because of this vast flood control project, chances of a third Johnstown flood now appear to be very slim.