

THE JOHNSTOWN FLOOD AND PITTSBURGH'S RELIEF, 1889¹

NATHAN D. SHAPPEE

MAN, by his careless acts, set the stage for the devastation of Johnstown on May 31, 1889, but the most tremendous rain ever recorded in Pennsylvania also played its part. Beginning on May 30 and continuing through to June 1, rain fell on the whole state of Pennsylvania. In its wake from New York to the Chesapeake Bay and from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh, a trail of flood and ruin gave mute and sickening testimony to the violence of this phenomenal storm. Over an area of twelve thousand square miles in Pennsylvania, an eight-inch rain fell. How much fell at Johnstown will never be known, because the river gauge was washed away at 10:44 A. M. on the day of the Great Flood.² However, up at South Fork Dam a pail, left out in the storm overnight, contained eight inches of rain water.

At its start, the storm appeared to be an ordinary cyclonic precipitation of the type that furnishes the rainfall through the eastern part of the United States. Beginning in eastern Kansas and Nebraska on May 28, it moved eastward into Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Michigan and northern Indiana had snow; New York had frost. By May 30, rain began to fall in Kansas, Missouri, and Illinois. On May 30 the government forecasters sent warnings of severe storms for

¹ This is the second of two articles based upon a paper read by Mr. Shappee at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on May 30, 1939, which in turn was derived from a much more extended account of the Johnstown Flood produced by the author in preparation for the acquisition of a doctor's degree from the University of Pittsburgh—which, incidentally he has since acquired. The first article, entitled "Spoliation and Encroachment in the Conemaugh Valley before the Johnstown Flood of 1889," appeared *ante*, 23:25-48 (March, 1940). *Ed.*

² Lorin Blodget, "The Floods of Pennsylvania, May 31 and June 1, 1889," in *Report of the Secretary of Internal Affairs of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for the Year Ending November 30, 1889*, p. 143 (Harrisburg, 1890); T. Russel, "The Johnstown Flood," in U. S. Signal Office, *Monthly Weather Review*, May-June, 1889, p. 117.

the Middle and South Atlantic states. This storm had split into two parts as it entered the Mississippi Valley; one part turned north to pass over the Great Lakes and crossed to New England; the other part drifted across Kentucky and Tennessee, where, aided by a southeast wind, the rain moved northward. On the morning of May 30, rain began to fall from the Tidewater area of Virginia to New York. By evening it had spread westward as far as the Panhandle of West Virginia and northward to Cleveland. Winds from the ocean and wind from the south forced this storm into a small mountainous area of Pennsylvania where the Allegheny Mountain prevented it from going toward Pittsburgh. So dense was the saturation in this area that rain fell for a period of thirty-two to thirty-six hours. The Grampian hills in Clearfield County received 6 inches of rain in seven hours. Emporium in Cameron County had 2.5 in two hours. Wellsboro in Tioga County had 9.8 inches in thirty-one hours; Harrisburg, 6.57 inches; Blue Knob, 10.52 inches; Huntingdon, 7.18 inches; and Somerset, 4.43 inches in twelve hours. Pittsburgh, protected by the mountains of Cambria, Indiana, and Westmoreland counties, had only 2.3 inches. Beginning about three in the afternoon of Memorial Day, unprecedented amounts of rain fell in the mountains for from twenty-four to thirty-six hours. Some recorders, with a mathematical flair, estimated that the average six-inch rain-fall put four and a third billion tons of water on an area of twelve hundred square miles in the mountains.³

Such an amazing amount of water could not be absorbed in such a short period of time, particularly since the ground was saturated from the previous heavy rainfall in May. Long before the downpour had ended, the streams were running bank full. Three inches of rain in the mountain area would ordinarily produce a flood; six or seven inches of rain were bound to produce the greatest flood ever known in the state. The West Branch of the Susquehanna was flooded by the afternoon of May 30, and the water continued to rise until Saturday, June 1. On May 31, the headwaters of the West Branch were running twelve feet deeper than ever before. Clearfield had flood waters in the streets by five o'clock on the morning of May 31. After inundating Clearfield, the

³ Russel, 136; Blodget, 147; John Bach McMaster, "The Johnstown Flood," in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 57:211 (1933).

flood rushed down the river to Renovo, which was under water by six in the evening. Renovo had sent telephone warnings to Lock Haven of the onrushing waters. By the time the flood invaded the streets and houses in this latter town the people had moved out of the danger zone. The flood broke the lumber boom and seventy-five million feet of logs started down the river. By three in the afternoon of May 31, the Susquehanna was three feet higher in its channel than it had been during the great flood of 1865. At three on the morning of June 1, the logs from Lock Haven began to tumble into the boom at Williamsport. Six hours later, unable to stand the strain, the boom gave way; 150,000,000 feet of logs started on their roaring, tumbling, battering trip to the Chesapeake.⁴ Before the timber cleared Williamsport, it had destroyed all sorts of small structures and stored materials. The river with its heavy freight now began to knock the bridges down. Bridges at Montgomery and Milton were pushed into the raging mass of logs. At Sunbury where the West and North Branches met, the flood from the West Branch was so heavy that logs and water backed up into the North Branch. Below Sunbury, the Susquehanna receives the waters of Penn's Creek, coming from Center County. This stream had become a torrent too. At Coburn, Penn's Creek had raised ten and a half feet in thirty minutes. Coburn and Millheim were isolated as the waters rushed southward.

While the swelling waters of the Susquehanna were rushing their cargo of logs down toward Harrisburg, the Juniata was vainly trying to carry off its drainage from the great storm. The Juniata, rising high in the mountains where the rain had been heaviest, was flooding towns and villages in its valley by daybreak of May 31. At Lewistown, water rose at the rate of two feet an hour; by 8 A. M. a stone bridge had been demolished. At noon the county bridge gave way; and a little later the Pennsylvania Railroad bridge, which had been weighted with loaded box cars. Lewistown, drawing its supplies and trade from the east bank of the Juniata and Kishacoquillas Valley, was thus isolated. Rolling eastward the Juniata and its tributaries tore out eleven county bridges in

⁴ After the Flood the lumbermen's associations advertised in the newspapers along the Susquehanna for stranded flood logs. "Captors" of logs received fifty cents per log. Cf. *Harrisburg Telegraph*, July 1, 1889, and *Harrisburg Daily Patriot*, July 2, 1889.

Mifflin County and twenty-three in Perry County in addition to the cribs of the old Pennsylvania Canal that had weathered all previous floods. When the Juniata poured its burden into the Susquehanna at Duncannon, Harrisburg, a few miles below, was quickly flooded. Water rose two feet higher in the capital than it had in the great Susquehanna flood of 1865.⁵

The flood waters of the West Branch, Penn's Creek, and the Juniata drained the eastern slopes of the Alleghenies. In the west, the Clarion River, Red Bank Creek, and the Conemaugh rise highest in the Alleghenies and fall the fastest and steepest. A typical mountain stream, the Little Conemaugh, and its principal branch, the Stonycreek, wind through the mountains for twenty-five miles before they escape the hills through the Packsaddle to join the Kiskiminetas to reach the Allegheny. At the confluence of the Little Conemaugh and the Stonycreek lies Johnstown, which in 1889 comprised a cluster of a dozen boroughs with a population of twenty-five thousand. The Conemaugh in 1889 was crossed by a dozen bridges in eighteen miles; the Stonycreek by five within the present confines of the city. Many of these bridges had been built on what should have properly been the river channel; but, to avoid additional expense, the river banks in some places had been filled in to make shorter bridges.

Upon these two restricted streams fell the burden of removing the water from this gigantic rainfall. With flood stage at Johnstown being from eight to ten feet, the town could not hope to escape a wetting. As the people in the boroughs began to move things to higher places in their stores and homes, many thought of the South Fork Reservoir high in the mountains. Uneasy about the rising water, people who had telephones kept in touch with each other on the progress of the rising water in Johnstown.

While Johnstown prepared for another flood, a small group of anxious men stood around the South Fork Dam and speculated on the effects of the storm upon the dam. In the center of the group was Colonel E. J. Unger, president of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, and John G. Parke, Jr., the resident engineer. Both men had

⁵ McMaster, 216-219; *Harrisburg Telegraph*, June 1, 3, 4, 1889; *Harrisburg Daily Patriot*, June 3, 4, 5, 1889.

been up since 6:30 and had remained out in the heavy rain to watch the rise of the water in the reservoir. While the men were at breakfast the water rose four inches on a stake. After breakfast Parke rode to the head of the "lake" to see how much water was coming into the dam from the tributary streams. He found the upper quarter of the reservoir already covered by debris. At the head of the lake he rowed over a four-strand barbed-wire fence on his way to examine South Fork Creek. Ordinarily this stream was seventy-five feet wide and two feet deep. Now it had overflowed its banks and was stripping branches from trees on its bank at a height of five feet from the ground. From his tour at the head of the reservoir, Parke returned to the clubhouse.

While the engineer was making his inspection, Colonel Unger set some employees, engaged in building a sewer before the storm, to digging a ditch at the western end of the breast of the dam. Here he hoped to excavate a trough that would act as a second spillway and thus relieve the burden of water flowing over the waste weir at the eastern end. However, the workmen had poor success in digging into hard shale and succeeded in making a ditch only two feet wide and fourteen inches deep. When the impounding waters entered this excavation, it was soon scooped out to a trough twenty-five feet wide and two feet deep.⁶

The waste weir at the eastern end of the embankment was carrying its full load of seven feet. When the club had repaired the dam they had built a roadway along the top of the dam and a bridge over the overflow to a road on the eastern end which led down into South Fork. After they had stocked their reservoir with black bass in 1880 they had placed heavy screen grids between the bridge supports on the floor of the weir to prevent the fish from swimming out of the dam. In the water they had placed floating logs, hooked together in V-shape, to keep brush from piling against the screens. Thus impeded by a bridge, grids, and drift guards, the wasteway was soon filled to capacity.

Colonel Unger, seeing that the overflow and his auxiliary ditch were unequal to the task of draining off the water, ordered one of the men

⁶ The foregoing account of the condition of the South Fork dam and the following statements, unless otherwise noted, are taken from a letter of John G. Parke to the Committee on the Cause of the Failure of the South Fork Dam printed in the *Transactions* of the American Society of Civil Engineers, 24:248-251 (January 15, 1890).

to plow furrows along the breast of the dam to prevent water from pouring over the outer face. With the water soaking into their shoes, the frantic men worked on this dangerous precipice until the water began to trickle, then to pour over the entire face of the dam.

Water began washing over the top of the wall at 11:30 A.M. Parke set out immediately to warn the people in South Fork—two and a half miles away. His warning was cool and calm and promptly heeded. When he returned to Lake Conemaugh, workmen had torn up part of the bridge floor in an attempt to remove the drift guards and screens. As he crossed the breast of the dam, then under water, he noticed that the water had begun to cut the outer face of the dam. Trickling into crevices between stones, it had loosened blocks and sent them rolling into the valley. After a hurried lunch at the clubhouse, he returned to the wall. Now a gap, ten feet by four, had been made on the outer wall. Working from the outer wall to the inner the pressure and erosion of the water cut a trough ten feet deep across the top of the wall. All the men at the dam then knew that it was but a matter of moments until the breast would buckle and fall into the cleft worn into the patched embankment.

While this small group of men were futilely trying to relieve the pressure on the dam, the people of Johnstown had risen, after a night of hard rain, to find their city already invaded by the rising water. At five in the morning, a landslide had caved in the stable at Kress's brewery. The Cambria Iron Company employees had been sent back home after reporting for work at seven in the morning. The rivers at this hour were still in their channels but the Point was flooded and people were lifting their carpets or moving goods out of their homes by boat and raft. A teamster had driven his team into a cellar excavation and had been drowned. In the *Tribune* office the staff was preparing to print the weekly edition for the rural subscribers. As the water rose editor Swank began an account of incidents as they came to the reporters' notice. In a dramatic account he has left a tense picture of the last few hours of Johnstown before the Flood:

As we write at noon, Johnstown is again under water, and all about us the tide is rising. Wagons have for hours been passing along the streets carrying people from submerged points to places of safety, and boats, floating as jaun-

tilly as on the bosom of a river, have traversed the thoroughfare in the lower end of town, removing pent-up inmates from homes to which ruin has come thrice in many years. . . .

From 7 o'clock on the water rose. People who were glad they "didn't live down town" began to wish they didn't live in town at all. On the water crept, and on, up one street and out another, across the imaginary lines between the many boroughs, until at last there was "consolidation," and the same wet blanket covered all. Eighteen inches an hour the Stonycreek rose for a time, and the Conemaugh about as rapidly.⁷

People began to worry about the bridges as they carried goods from basement to first floor and from first floor to second. Logs washing over the Johnstown Lumber Company's boom on Stonycreek piled up against the Poplar Street bridge. Accumulating pressure at this point, the mass of drift forced the bridge off its moorings at eleven. Floating down the swollen river, it just managed to glide under the Franklin Street bridge and finally lodged against the Cambria City bridge, which it pushed from its piers. Along the Conemaugh, the flood waters had flooded East Conemaugh west of the Pennsylvania Railroad station since early in the morning.

In the beleaguered town, people who had telephones spent the time in reporting on the Flood to each other. The telephone at the Western Union station was silenced after one in the afternoon, because Mrs. Ogle and her staff had moved to the second floor. They had moved the telegraph upstairs and operated until three—an hour before the Flood-wall carried the building into the wreckage at the stone bridge. At one o'clock the streets of Johnstown were flooded in the central part of town. At one-thirty, Henry Wilson Storey, historian of Cambria County and ex-burgess of Johnstown, telephoned the *Tribune* that he was standing in water "up to his middle." About the same time Cyrus Elder, solicitor for the Cambria Iron Company, fell into the water when his boat capsized in the public park. An employee of Mose's tailor shop went out with a boom "to sweep back the ocean from his doorstep," but with little success. The *Tribune* staff gave up the plan to finish the weekly issue and settled down to being marooned:

⁷ *Johnstown Weekly Tribune*, June 14, 1889. This number was the first issued after the Flood. The paper had been partly set up and printed on Friday, May 31, but the rise in water prevented finishing and distributing the issue. In the two-weeks interval between the Flood and the issue, the *Tribune* staff continued to add material to the original copy.

At 3 o'clock the town sat down with its hands in its pockets to make the best of a very dreary situation. All had got out of reach of the flood that could, and there was nothing to do but wait; and what impatient waiting it was anyone who has ever been penned in by a flood and has watched the water rising; and night coming on, can imagine. . . .

The flood carried a live cow down from some point above Moxham, and she struck against a pier of the dislodged Poplar street bridge. Securing a foothold on the pier, she stood there for quite a while, but finally made a misstep, fell into the current, and was carried off.

A dead horse was carried down the Stonycreek during the forenoon.

At 3:15 the Central Telephone Office called the *Tribune* up to say it had been informed by Agent Decker, of the Pennsylvania Railroad freight station, that the South Fork Reservoir was getting worse all the time, and that the danger of its breaking was increasing momentarily. It is idle to speculate what would be the result if this tremendous body of water—three miles long, a mile wide in places, and sixty feet deep at the breast at its normal stage—should be thrown into the already submerged Valley of the Conemaugh.⁸

At the very time when "Tom" Swank had written the above speculation, the South Fork Reservoir gave way. Awash since before noon, the great wall could not withstand the pressure that four thousand accumulated gallons per second was creating. Tearing away at the crack it had already made, flushing out the rocks and soil, the largest mass of water in the world, confined behind an earthen wall, pushed the center of the dam ahead of it and rushed into the valley. The break in the dam tore out all the repair work of 1880 and 1881 and part of the original wall beneath as well. Ninety thousand cubic yards of earth and stone were flushed away. The break was 420 feet wide at the top and 200 at the bottom. McMaster, an engineer in early days, has computed just what amount of water the released "lake" poured into the already flooded Conemaugh. Into this swollen mountain stream tumbled an amount of water equal to a stream 500 feet wide, 20 feet deep, and 12 miles long. Lake Conemaugh more than doubled the water in the channel of the river between South Fork and Johnstown. Such a stream, flowing over Niagara would take thirty minutes to pass; it took forty-five for the reservoir to escape through the huge gap in the wall. This stupendous body of water lost some of its energy due to friction and

⁸ *Johnstown Weekly Tribune*, June 14, 1889. The title of the article is "Before the Reservoir Came."

obstructions in its course, but the four-hundred-foot drop in traversing the twelve miles from South Fork to Johnstown gave it momentum to roll locomotives for almost a mile and strength enough to bend a locomotive tender around a tree.⁹

The water from the dam was rolled into a ball by the steep banks of the river; it formed into a solid mass which no object could penetrate or deter; it swept everything before it. Houses, "transfixed by huge logs or whole trees," stones, railroad equipment, track, and people were woven into a roaring mass as the Flood wave rushed along with a dark mist over it. When the water reached South Fork village, it hurled itself against the north bank of the Conemaugh, and, for a moment, separated; one part to the west cleared out South Fork, the other to the east rushed up the Conemaugh and nearly engulfed a passenger train which had been detained due to track obstructions. But this dissipation of the Flood's strength lasted only a moment. No sooner had the Flood wave parted than it united again and began to roar down the valley. A mile west of South Fork the Flood came upon the old stone viaduct that spanned a narrow neck of land at the deep bend in the Conemaugh. This arch had been built for the Portage Tunnel and was regarded as a twin monument with the tunnel to the skill of the state engineers. The Flood, however, was no respecter of monuments; in an instant it tore out this seventy-foot bridge; then coursed the viaduct line across the bend of the river. Mineral Point, a village opposite the bend of the river, was cleared off to the bare rock. Below the village 2,000 feet of railroad track and bed were so completely removed that surveyors later had difficulty in reestablishing the lines. At East Conemaugh the Flood scattered the railroad shops and rolled engines almost to Johnstown. Here the Flood wave engulfed the Day Express stalled since morning due to washouts east in the valley. Uneasy passengers were finally given a

⁹ "Report of the Special Committee of the American Society of Civil Engineers on the 'Cause of the Failure of the South Fork Dam,'" *Engineering Record*, 24:216 (September 5, 1891); American Society of Civil Engineers, *Transactions*, 24:454; McMaster, 231-232, 237. After the water had passed through the broken wall, a gravel bar, 1,500 feet long, 160 feet wide, and from 5 to 12 feet high, was deposited in the bed of the South Fork Branch, according to an article on "The South Fork Dam," in Engineers Society of Western Pennsylvania, *Proceedings*, 5:89-99 (June 18, 1889).

warning to run to the hills. As they fled over the uneven ground, box cars and houses descended on their abandoned train.¹⁰

The Flood struck East Conemaugh at twelve minutes before four in the afternoon.

Telegraphic conversations between the operators at South Fork and East Conemaugh had been maintained since morning. The operator at South Fork advised that warning be given to the people of the lower valley to be ready to fly to the hills on a moment's notice. Accordingly word had spread through Franklin and East Conemaugh that the Reservoir was in great danger of breaking. At East Conemaugh a work train, under engineer John Hess, had been stationed since earlier in the day. Before the Flood was visible to the people around the shops, its roar was heard. Hess tied the whistle on his engine down and fled to higher ground. Many people in the two boroughs as well as people farther west in the valley heard the prolonged shriek of the whistle and ran for their lives.¹¹ The Flood wall demolished Franklin, Woodvale, and Conemaugh without a break in momentum. Only the ruined wall of the Woolen Works remained erect in Woodvale—every house in this village of twelve hundred was destroyed. At four o'clock the Flood entered Johnstown, already flooded and apprehensive, a town that knew what had happened as soon as it heard the roar of the Flood.

Descriptions of what happened in the town at best can be only partial truths, because the survivors after fifty years have forgotten the horror of the moment. Secondary writers, on the other hand, lack the intense emotion of the actual experience and fall back upon the best accumulation of vivid words that they can find. From the great numbers of accounts and oral recitals of survivors, none stands out more clearly than that of the Reverend Mr. H. L. Chapman, pastor of the Franklin Street Methodist Church in 1889. Writing better than he realized, he captured the fantastic horror in those few moments when the torrent entered Johnstown:

On the fatal day while it was yet early, breakfast being over, I sat down in my study to prepare a sermon for Sunday night. The text I had selected was,

¹⁰ *Johnstown Weekly Tribune*, June 14, 1889.

¹¹ *Johnstown Weekly Tribune*, June 14, 1889.

"Man dieth and wasteth away, yea, man giveth up the ghost and where is he?" . . .

About four o'clock I saw through the window that the water was again rising. As it had for sometime been subsiding, and no natural cause could account for a sudden rise, I was greatly alarmed. I said nothing to the family, not wishing to alarm my wife and Mrs. Brinker, but I said as quietly as possible to Mr. Parker, "Let us go to the front door and see how it looks now." I put down my little granddaughter, Nellie, who had been sitting on my knee, and went. On opening the front door, almost immediately we saw the water rise a foot or more. I said to Mr. Parker, "We must take up the carpets." He seized the parlor carpet and pulled at it, but it was too tightly nailed and he could not get it started. The next moment a freight car came rolling down the pavements in front of the house, on which a man was standing, who, as it passed a tree standing in the corner of the small yard, grasped hold of its branches, and swung himself onto the porch roof, from which he entered a second floor window.

As soon as I saw the box car coming I cried out, "The reservoir has broken, run to the attic!" All ran immediately up the front stairway except myself. A gas fire was still burning in the study, and fearing it might set fire to the house, I ran in and turned it off. . . . As I turned to go to the hall stairs, I saw a huge wave come rolling in by the front door, sufficient to overwhelm me; but I ran before it to the kitchen, where I had just time to reach the back stairway, and run for my life to the attic. A minute more and I would have been caught and borne up against the ceiling, where drowning would have been certain. When I reached the attic, I found the family in a frightened group, standing together in the middle of the floor, where we were quickly joined by two young men, who had leaped into the open window from the roof of a restaurant, belonging to Mr. Carpenter. This being a wooden building, beside the parsonage; the two boys had got upon the roof, saw their chance to escape as it whirled around and came close to our third story window. The railroad agent had also come up into the attic. Looking from the windows the terrible crash could be seen, as the frame house rushed against the more substantial brick structures along Main Street.¹²

Such an experience had countless repetitions that day. Families already marooned in their houses knew first of the Flood wave when it burst open the doors or came in through the windows. People gathered in supposed safety on the upper floors of houses and hotels were plunged into the timbered mass. Some took to the roofs of their homes only to have the houses crumble and the roofs float away. Swank, from his vantage point on Franklin Street, saw the Flood as it hit the central

¹² Henry L. Chapman, *Memoirs of an Itinerant; an Autobiography* (1907), 274-277.

part of town; saw buildings "melt like sugar in a fire." Regarding the Flood wave as some evil vital force he later wrote:

It came like a thief, and was upon us before we were aware. Already when it reached us it had numbered the victims by the hundreds. Mineral Point and East Conemaugh were gone, a passenger train was engulfed. Woodvale was swept away. Conemaugh Borough was shaved off as if by the sharp surface of an avalanche; in a moment Johnstown was tumbling all over itself; houses at one end nodded to houses at the other end and went like a swift, deceitful friend to meet, embrace, and crush them. Then on sped the wreck in a whirl, the angry water baffled for a moment, running up the hill with the town and the helpless multitude on its back, the flood shaking with rage, and dropping here and there a portion of its burden—crushing, grinding, pulverizing all. Then back with great frame buildings, floating along like ocean steamers, upper decks crowded, hands clinging to every support that could be reached, and so on down to the great stone bridge, where the houses, piled mountain high, took fire, and burned with all the fury of the hell you read about—cremation alive in your own home, perhaps a mile from its foundation; dear ones slowly consumed before your eyes, and the same fate your own a moment later.¹³

In an editorial entitled "The Cause," Swank reviewed the causes of the flood and laid the blame upon the South Fork Dam and the men who owned it:

We had got through with our share of the ordinary flood, had suffered all that we could from the narrowing of our streams and from the great stone railroad bridge obstructing the free flow of the Conemaugh at the lower end of town; the waters had begun to recede, and all were in hopes of seeing the ground about their homes or other places of refuge again by sundown, when, without an instant of warning, the Reservoir was upon us. There was no escape. A rat caught in a trap and placed in a bucket of water would not be more helpless than we were. Pompeii, when the great volcano started had a chance to run. But here was Johnstown, with its thirty thousand souls, at the mercy of an element fiercer, swifter, more relentless, more destructive than fire, escaped through a work that should never have been built and all the penalty on the heads of the innocent!

Thus we find that from three unnatural causes we have suffered. First, and seriously enough, though only slight in comparison, from the narrowing of the streams; second from the building of the big stone bridge, with its ponderous arches taking up room that should have been free for the rush of water; and third from the Reservoir which dealt the final blow. . . .¹⁴

¹³ *Johnstown Weekly Tribune*, June 14, 1889. The above description is from Swank's feature article entitled "Our Calamity."

¹⁴ *Johnstown Weekly Tribune*, June 14, 1889.

From other sources Swank learned how the Flood had coursed through the doomed town. The great mass of Flood wreckage forming the "wall" had followed the channel of the Conemaugh until it struck the northern end of Yoder hill at the western end of the stone bridge. Here all the wreckage was dropped as the water sought to flow through the arches of the bridge. Additional water, the succeeding waves of the Flood, followed the north-south streets of the town from the Conemaugh to the Stonycreek. Jackson, Clinton, Franklin, Main, and Walnut streets received the burden of these currents. All the water and wreckage flowed to the jam of drift at the bridge. Unable to escape, the Flood backed up Stonycreek for more than a mile, destroying houses on its voyage up the stream and more as it descended. So strong was this movement that a giant maelstrom was formed in Kernville where houses and people spun around as the two rivers fought for control of the level land. In a short time the continued Flood from the Conemaugh washed a seven-hundred-foot break at the eastern end of the stone bridge. The water, which had been high enough to float houses, subsided until some houses came to rest on solid ground again. The Flood rushed through Cambria City and Minersville with doubled fury. The Ten Acre bridge at the western end of Cambria City was swept away even though it had been weighted with seven carloads of ingots. The current tore out the sidings along the river's edge and bent steel rails almost double. Finally out of the congested part of the valley, the Flood rushed toward the Packsaddle. "As if repenting the last blow struck, the cruel current, weakened and spread and all was over."¹⁵

When night settled over the ruined valley, the survivors began to realize their situation and to feel for many long hours the horror of what they had experienced. Huddled in wet clothing, in the dark, marooned people spent a terrifying night. To the east St. John Gualbert's Church burned; and for all they knew, its terror might spread to the whole town. At the railroad bridge a huge fire roared all night while the shrieks of people trapped in the drift sent shocks of fright through the hearts of the helpless survivors on the hills around. Children were born amid the chaos, people died that night; some who lived turned white haired as they waited the coming dawn.

¹⁵ *Johnstown Weekly Tribune*, June 14, 19, 20, 1889.

On the day of the Flood, the Pennsylvania Railroad had called its work-trains for service in the mountains. Track had to be cleared of slides; fill had to be dumped in washouts before service could be resumed. Eastbound passenger service had been caught between these breaks in the lines. A passenger train at South Fork and the day express at East Conemaugh had been halted until the track could be repaired. By the time of the Flood, there were work-train crews at Buttermilk Falls, East Conemaugh, the stone bridge, and Sang Hollow. As the Flood roared down the valley these workmen and the telegraphers rendered what aid they could and rescued many a hopeless victim.¹⁶

Superintendent Robert Pitcairn, being informed of the serious nature of the damages, started for Johnstown to supervise the repairs. When he arrived at Sang Hollow, four miles west of Johnstown, the telegraph operator informed him that the telegraph lines to the east were broken. As he boarded his train to continue his trip eastward, his party noticed fresh drift in the river. Presently a messenger from the work train at the stone bridge arrived and said that Johnstown was annihilated. This news was partially verified when people began to float past the tower. Upon his own responsibility, he telegraphed the news to Pittsburgh and urged that a mass meeting be called to organize relief for the valley.¹⁷

This telegram reached Pittsburgh on Friday evening at seven. Mayor William McCallin was ill; the call for the meeting was issued for one o'clock on Saturday at old City Hall. In the meantime, Pitcairn had returned to Pittsburgh to meet the city officials. Newspapers, telegraph, telephone, firemen, police, and rumor spread the news throughout the twin cities, Pittsburgh and Allegheny.

When the news arrived in Pittsburgh, the newspapers hurriedly prepared their reporters for the trip to the stricken area. The *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette* chartered a special train which got as far as Bolivar. From here the reporters went overland to New Florence. One man

¹⁶ *Johnstown Weekly Tribune*, June 14, 1889; letter of Assistant Superintendent N. Trump to J. T. Richards, Pittsburgh, August, 1894, and Joseph T. Richards, "Rebuilding the Pennsylvania Railroad," an address before the Engineers' Club of Philadelphia, June 2, 1894, at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Howard W. Schotter, *The Growth and Development of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company*, 22 ff. (Philadelphia, 1927).

¹⁷ *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, extra edition, June 1, 1889.

on horseback raced ahead to secure the telegraph line. At four in the morning, June 1, the first reports from the Flood area began to arrive in Pittsburgh. In a few hours, representatives of all the important Pittsburgh papers had reached the outer edges of the stricken area. They did not get to Johnstown, however, until Sunday, June 2.¹⁸

Pittsburgh was highly excited by the time the mass meeting was called to order. The mayor and council had already conferred. The chamber of commerce had met but had deferred independent action to unite with the mayor for relief. When the meeting began, the old city hall was crowded to overflowing. Mayor McCallin was appointed chairman. The group adopted the name of "Citizens Relief Committee of Pittsburgh." Pitcairn told the attentive crowd what he had seen. Quickly five committees were appointed in addition to the chairman and secretary. One committee was to raise money; another to receive and ship clothing; a third to arrange for river and rail transportation for supplies; a fourth to house and care for victims; and a fifth to go to Johnstown with the first load of supplies on Saturday afternoon. Then a committee of undertakers was added, and soon several other groups were organized to manage additional work. Most of these committees departed to begin their duties.

Then there was a call for contributions and the storm of checks and bank notes began. Fives, tens, fifties, and thousands flooded the chairman's table. Treasurer [William R.] Thompson's hands were filled and Mayor McCallin held out both of his. In a minute more, H. I. Gourly was called to his assistance. Three men stood there for half an hour, and the crowd kept both hands busy. It was almost impossible to keep track of the contributions.

"Whose \$25 is this?" cries Mr. Thompson. And a moment later—"Somebody laid this one hundred dollar bill here—who was it?"

Business men and their employees, distillers and doctors of divinity, saloon keepers and prohibitionists, vied with each other. Differences of creed and condition disappeared in the generous rivalry of charity. There was no speech making, no oratory but the golden eloquence of cash.

Big and little contributions got applause, so long as they were in proportion to the means of the giver. For almost an hour, at the rate of a thousand dollars a minute, the storm of money poured down upon the table, until \$48,116.70 had been received.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, June 2, 1889.

¹⁹ *Pittsburgh Times*, June 3, 1889.

While this flood of money was pouring into the officers' hands, the telegraph lines were pouring another flood of cash and draw-orders into Pittsburgh. With communication to the east broken, with Johnstown flooded out, with Harrisburg and Philadelphia besieged with pleas to aid Williamsport and the Susquehanna towns, Pittsburgh became the great depositary of the country's first generous response as well as the nearest relief station for the ruined towns. Before the first meeting at the city hall ended, the finance committee requested that food and money be deposited with the churches on Sunday. With \$50,000 raised on Saturday afternoon, seventy-six churches contributed over \$6,000 on Sunday, June 2. Forty-four of these raised from \$100 to \$2,000 for relief. The newspapers had opened contribution lists on June 1. By Monday morning, June 3, the Pittsburgh committee had \$100,000 in hand; by Tuesday, \$200,000; by Thursday, \$270,000; by Monday, June 10, \$400,000; and so on until \$831,295.62 had been raised or received in Pittsburgh.²⁰

While the first relief meeting was in session at city hall, William R. Scott and his committee departed for the Union Station to take charge of the first relief train for Johnstown. Doctors, police, firemen, and volunteers crowded on this first train to carry food and materials. The tracks were so congested with stalled traffic that the relief train did not arrive at Sang Hollow until ten, Saturday night. Here they found a washout for more than 400 feet. A Pennsylvania work train was already on the scene and busily engaged in rebuilding the track. The volunteers, including members of the Americus Club, packed the food and provisions over the hill, around the washout, until two carloads had been transferred. On the east side of the break, the men improvised a flatcar by using two handcars for wheel carriages and planks for a floor. This car was then pushed along the track until the goods could again be transferred to the work train and taken to the stone bridge. By two

²⁰ J. B. Kremer, *Report of the Secretary of the Flood Relief Commission, Appointed to Distribute the Funds Contributed for the Relief of Sufferers in Pennsylvania, by the Flood of May 31st and June 1st, 1889*, p. 14 (Harrisburg, 1890); *Pittsburgh Press*, June 3, 1889; *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, June, 1889; William McCreery, chairman, *Johnstown Flood; Report of the Citizens' Relief Committee of Pittsburgh*, 5 (Pittsburgh, 1890).

o'clock Sunday morning, two carloads of food had been deposited at the western end of the bridge and the weary workers anxiously awaited daybreak to begin their labor of mercy. While the volunteers were transporting the food around the broken track, the railroad men made a trestle and track. At eight, Sunday morning, the repairs were finished and Pittsburgh had a direct railroad line to the stone bridge.

When daybreak came, the men at the bridge stood aghast at the sight before them:

The scene there beheld was horrible beyond description. Across the north end of the bridge, where the railroad embankment had been, swept a foul and loathsome torrent 800 feet wide. Along the east side of the bridge was the jagged mass of debris, rising twenty feet above the track, crackling and smoking and filling the air with the unmistakable odor of burnt flesh. Beyond this, where Johnstown had once been, was a lake, a great stretch of sandy plain and here and there clusters of partly wrecked houses. About and between these houses was piled, often fifty feet high, every form of wreckage the flood produced, lashed together by hundreds of inches of wire and packed by the water into one inextricable mass.²¹

The Pittsburgh relief corps fell rapidly to work. The carloads of food were distributed. The rest of the provisions were placed in a depot at Morrellville. During the day a rope cable was strung over the chasm at the east end of the bridge. Western Union connections were made; reporters arrived and began to send their vivid descriptions of the disaster to the country. The police guarded the food depot; firemen did what they could to put out the fire at the bridge. Pittsburgh sent out four more relief trains on Sunday: a trainload of coffins; one of lumber; one with tents and boats; and one with doctors, police, firemen, and 1,500 pounds of dynamite. The Allegheny County Electric Company dispatched a dynamo and eight arc lights, with a crew to operate the equipment. Fifty-five undertakers volunteered. A B. & O. train carried 500 workmen. Supplies poured into Pittsburgh at such a rate that they could not be sent to Johnstown for days. Cars labeled "Johnstown" were in almost every eastbound freight train. Before a week had passed, a carload of potatoes arrived from Walla Walla, Washington. Salt Lake City sent a carload of provisions; Chicago, a trainload of

²¹ McMaster, 328-330.

furniture; Saginaw, six carloads of lumber; Minneapolis, sixteen carloads of flour; Cincinnati, 20,000 pounds of ham; and Wheeling, a carload of nails. Apace with such far-flung charity, Pittsburgh and Allegheny County continued their beneficence. Arbuckle's gave 300,000 pounds of coffee; Chartiers Creamery, a carload of milk; small merchants put up boxes for Johnstown; housewives packed baskets of food tucked in by clean white napkins. Beginning on Monday, June 3, the relief committee drew plans to send workmen into the valley to remove the debris. Realizing that the wreckage contained hundreds of corpses of people and animals which would soon constitute health hazards, the Pittsburgh men made arrangements with Booth and Flinn to take charge of the removal of debris. W. R. Jones had telegraphed for 2,000 men and 1,000 feet of pontoon bridge on Sunday. With 500 men in the town on Sunday, the lists were daily augmented. Booth and Flinn took 900 to the valley on Monday; Long and Company and the Chartiers Tool Works sent their workmen. Later 200 raftsmen came from Clearfield, and on June 10, 200 axmen arrived from Michigan. By June 8 there were 3,000 men at work in the valley.²²

The full week, beginning June 3, was devoted to all sorts of relief activity by all sorts of groups in Pittsburgh. Earliest of the fraternal orders to aid was the Americus Club, which held a meeting on Saturday morning, June 1, and sent a delegation to Johnstown on the first relief train. The Grand Army of the Republic also met on Saturday. The Junior Order of United American Mechanics met in a federal court room on Saturday, and ordered a committee to leave for Johnstown on Sunday. By June 8, six different fraternal orders had their own separate relief depots in Johnstown.²³

Non-fraternal organizations were as generous and prompt as the secret orders. On Saturday the various commercial exchanges started subscriptions. The Oil Exchange raised \$600; the city employees, \$117 in a half hour. On June 4 the Pittsburgh Society of Spiritualists raised

²² *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, June, 1889; *Pittsburgh Press*, June 10, 1889. Company B of the state militia was sent to Johnstown by the Chamber of Commerce, but General Hastings sent the men back to Pittsburgh because they had come without his orders.

²³ *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, June 8, 1889.

over \$100 with program readings, recitations, and music. The maligned South Fork Club raised \$3,000 and contributed 1,500 blankets. The lawyers raised a fund to buy books for the Johnstown lawyers. The state medical association adjourned its meetings because the members wanted to go to Johnstown. Children in thirty-nine schools raised \$2,773.15 during the week of June 3. The Western Penitentiary baked 1,000 loaves of bread a day for the flood sufferers.²⁴ The Chinese citizens of Pittsburgh, learning that some of their countrymen had been drowned, contributed \$124 to the fund.

While the men of Pittsburgh were directing the financial assistance and the clearance of debris, the women of Allegheny County organized a Ladies Relief Committee. Meeting with Chairman McCreery on June 4, the women planned to care for refugees who might be sent from Johnstown. Using the Second Presbyterian Church as headquarters, they soon had a kitchen and dining room ready. A station committee received the bedraggled sufferers as they alighted from the train. Escorted to the church they were given clean clothing and a warm meal. Later they were taken to homes and hospitals that had already been canvassed for bed space. A hospital was set up in the old building of the Western University of Pennsylvania on the North Side. Later, headquarters were established in the buildings of the Pittsburgh Female College on Eighth Street below Penn. While this part of the work went forward, all sorts of ladies' sewing circles made clothing, repaired garments, and packed them for Johnstown. The Children's Aid Society of Western Pennsylvania was active also. Sending its president, Mrs. H. C. Campbell, to Johnstown on June 2, this organization took charge of the registration of orphans and widows and arranged for the removal of orphans from Johnstown. In fifty days, the women cared for 2,000 persons, and distributed 114,968 garments. Over 600 applications were received for the adoption of Flood orphans.²⁵

Pittsburgh had preëmpted the field in the relief of Johnstown, but it felt that Governor Beaver, in Harrisburg, who had received a greater sum than Pittsburgh, should take over the restoration of the ruined area.

²⁴ *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, June 13, 1889.

²⁵ McCreery, 17-20; *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, June 4-24, 1889.

After a discussion in Johnstown on June 9, Beaver promised to take the burden of clearing the debris from the devastated valley from the shoulders of the Pittsburgh committee.²⁶ On June 12, Director Scott surrendered his task to General Hastings. The Pittsburgh workmen were paid off and returned home. In the twelve days during which Pittsburgh had managed the relief of the city, 1,192 bodies had been recovered, and streets and alleys had been cleared. The Pittsburgh relief committee on July 26 turned \$400,000 over to the new state commission, and on September 21, another \$160,000 was remitted. Pittsburgh had handled over \$800,000 of the relief money, of which Pittsburgh and Allegheny had given \$250,770 in cash alone. Treasurer Thompson, when the books were closed, wrote, although he did not realize it, the best summary of Pittsburgh's relief in Johnstown:

The self denial and unrecorded toil of numbers of men and women over the land, refute the pessimistic assumption that generosity and personal sacrifice are not realizable ideals. Crises quicken the heroism latent in human hearts, and some compensation for the Johnstown disaster will be derived from the exercise of those great and benevolent impulses which never fail to spring flower-like from such calamities.²⁷

²⁶ At the conference a bitter political feud almost broke out. The anti-Quay forces of Magee and Flinn, using the *Pittsburgh Times*, had urged a special session of the legislature and a special appropriation for relief. Governor Beaver, unwilling to do this, agreed to take over the work himself, secure loans, and have the legislature repay the loans in regular session. Beaver's plan was put into practice. The Pittsburgh men rallied to the support of the governor.

²⁷ McCreery, 25-26.