



# RIVERS RISING: The Great Flood of 1936

By Anne Madarasz, Museum Division Director

LOWER DIAMOND ST. MAR. 18





As never before in its sooty existence was Pittsburgh prostrated as by the cataclysmic force last week of the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio when, swollen with a four-day downpour of rain and snow and sleet, they burst from their banks like mad destroying things to an undreamed height of 46.4 feet....

—*The Bulletin Index*, March 26, 1936



# It started with heavy rains...

**Previous page: Lower Diamond Street, now Forbes Avenue, looking toward the Diamond Market.**

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in late March, accelerating the melting of winter snow. By the time the flood waters receded a week later, the destruction and devastation was almost unfathomable: 62 dead in the region, over 500 injured, 135,000 homeless, and millions of dollars in property damage to homes, businesses, and industry. Perhaps best known are the pictures of a flooded downtown Pittsburgh, but the damage ranged much farther afield, from Johnstown where residents fled in panic from the

rising waters, to Sharpsburg and Etna where people scrambled to the top floors of homes, and throughout 11 states and the District of Columbia.

To commemorate the 70th anniversary of this event, known as the St. Patrick's Day flood of 1936, History Center staff has created an exhibition drawn from its collection of original accounts, photographs, newspapers, books, and film. While the passage of time has dulled our understanding of the human

**Below: A rescue crew rows through New Kensington.**







Hornes department store, Pittsburgh.

Bringing death, hunger, suffering and property damage beyond estimate, the waters virtually isolated Pittsburgh, narrowed the Golden Triangle to half-size and crippled industry, business, and transportation.

—*Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph*,  
March 18, 1936

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We didn't get any milk,  
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Oliver Iron and Steel as seen from the 10th Street Bridge.





The Point - Pgh. The Great Flood March 17 1936

Pittsburgh's Point was inundated during the 1936 flood.

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Perishables awash in the Strip District's produce terminal.



A flood control brochure issued immediately after the 1936 tragedy.



McCann's department store, Pittsburgh.

toll of this flood, a reading of newspapers and letters from the period brings alive the turmoil and destruction caused by the rising waters.

Recent flooding, both in our area and in New Orleans, has made this event all the more real, reminding us of the destructive power of water and the pain that accompanies the aftermath of disaster. The 1936 flood, the worst in Pittsburgh's history, also brought reform. The passage of the Flood Control Act in June 1936 authorized the construction of a system of dams and reservoir projects by both the Army Corps of Engineers and affected communities. Five dams were completed before World War II, and building began in earnest again after the war. The human and economic toll of the 1936 flood demonstrated the power of nature and made clear the necessity for change. ☀