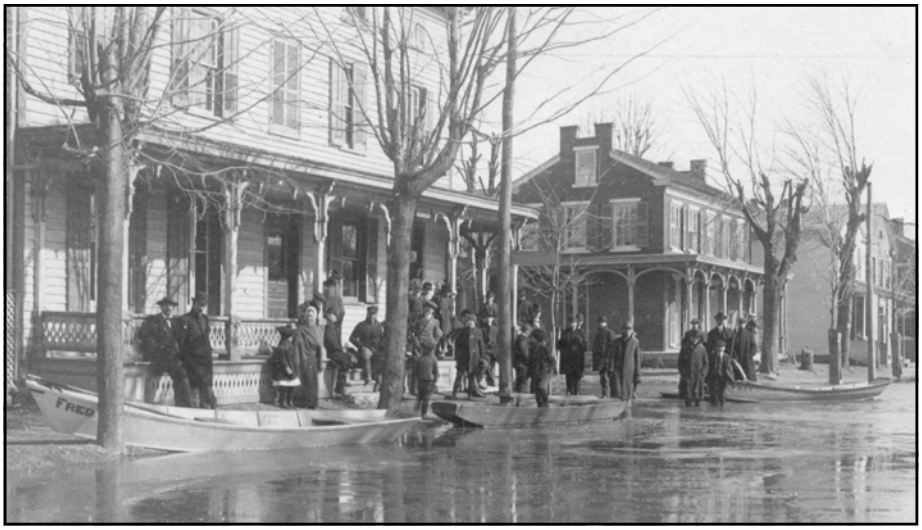
1904 SUSQUEHANNA RIVER FLOODS

Introduction
George A. Turner

One hundred years ago in the first three months of 1904, Columbia County communities along the Susquehanna River and other areas where the river flowed endured terrible flooding and property damage. It became the worst flooding experience in this area. In a period of six and a half weeks, there occurred three floods that crested on January 24, February 10, and March 9 in Bloomsburg. The latter one reached a level of 32.7 feet making it the highest flood stage on record. The Agnes Flood in June 1972 was the second highest at 31.2 feet.

A combination of weather factors created the ideal conditions for these winter floods. In the first week of January the temperatures dropped to sub-zero figures; Bloomsburg recorded a low of twenty-six degrees below zero. After weeks of an arctic type climate, it created an enormous build-up of river ice. A newspaper account reported there were immense chunks of ice measuring from twenty-eight to thirty-four inches in thickness and protruding as high as eighteen feet in the river. In the fourth week the piercing cold disappeared with the arrival of moderate temperatures causing the river to rise since the ice acted as a barrier or dam impeding its flow. Flood waters inundated the low lands of Espy, Bloomsburg, Rupert, and Catawissa and forced the closing of the trolley and railroads lines for three days. In the western and southern sections of Bloomsburg, many of the residents fled when the rising water engulfed their homes. Shelter for them became available in hotels, the Town Hall, and James Magee made his home available to all who could fine a place therein. The Morning Press *observed: "The ruin and destruction wrought by the memorable floods of 1865 and 1902 were mild compared with that of yesterday which made hundreds homeless, and which caught in its maw human life which was saved only by acts of heroism." Much of Catawissa and Espy were under water. The amount of ice in certain parts of the river created such a dense accumulation that it extended down to the river bed. However, when the temperature dropped it reducing further melting; the water receded, but the ice gorge still remained.*



Flood waters at Espy in 1904

Two and half weeks later the Susquehanna went on a rampage a second time causing more flooding and damage than the earlier flood. A newspaper account reported that "Columbia county is again the center of another awful flood that is already leaving in its wake ruin and destruction." Like a small glacier, when the huge amount of ice began to move on the afternoon of February 9, its awesome power easily destroyed the covered bridge linking Berwick and Nescopeck. "The news that the bridge was breaking from its abutments spread like wild fire. It electrified the town; school

children were allowed to leave school to witness the scene." The same afternoon downstream the pressure of the ice jam destroyed the Mifflinville Bridge. The estimated loss of these two structures came to $300,000. After the water subsided, the river still remained choked with massive amounts of ice creating the potential for more flooding.

This fear became a reality a month later when rains came creating a rapid water runoff forcing the ice glutted river to flood at its highest record level. In a second assault on area bridges, it demolished the river bridges at Catawissa, Danville, Northumberland, and a number of bridges on Catawissa Creek; however, the Bloomsburg span survived the onslaught despite the bridge floor being damaged. With the exception of the Bloomsburg and Sullivan Railroad, all of the trolley and railroad lines near the river had to suspend service for a period of time. The Morning Press *concluded the flood was the "worst flood in the history of the Susquehanna Valley," and when the ice jam broke loose it "wrought damage that can only be estimated by the hundreds of thousands of dollars." In the aftermath of this disaster, large ice slabs weighing many tons, littered the landscape within half a mile of the river.*

An account of these 1904 floods appeared in the Bloomsburg's newspaper, The Morning Press, *thirty-seven years later in a column called "The Passing Throng." Two of these columns published on March 10 and 11, 1941, recounted various aspects of this event. They are reprinted with permission of the editor of the* Press Enterprise*, (successor to* The Morning Press*) after some spelling corrections and a few additions in brackets for clarity purposes. The photographs that are included come from the Society's collection.*

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The Passing Throng

March 10, 1941

This had been one of the weekends when we have been wondering just what we would write for this column today when we were reminded that thirty-seven years ago yesterday the flood of 1904 was at its crest. It was exactly a month earlier on February 9 when the Berwick and Mifflinville bridges were carried away. Then it was thought conditions could be no worse. But, to keep the record straight and to give those not old enough to have experienced that good a picture of it, it might be of interest to handle it in a more or less complete form.

The Morning Press was better organized to handle the flood of 1904 than the flood of 1902. It had become by that time a story of seemingly one flood after another.

There are none who went through the flood of 1904 in *The Morning Press* office who will ever forget those hectic days that saw almost every bridge in this section, except the East Bloomsburg river bridge go down the river and crack. It was not a job of a day, but rather a job of months and through all those anxious days there was never a time when there was not the same keen desire to make distribution of the paper as there was to get all the flood news.

The story of that flood alone would fill pages, but in connection with it there are still indelibly imprinted the memories of one three-day period.

For weeks the circulation manager of *The Morning Press* had been daily driving

to Berwick, using the back road through Centre township in getting papers there each morning. That had been the enforced procedure for the trolley lines were cut off by ice and water and the main road was likewise blocked.

In *The Morning Press* office there had already been a forty-eight hour stretch without sleep for the writer, for the flood was reaching a higher stage than ever before, and bridges were going out in all directions.

Just about the time that the writer was ready to put on his overcoat to hurry home for a few hours to sleep the telephone bell rang.

Delivering Papers

"I can't take the papers to Berwick," came the voice of the circulation manger. "Down here" -- he lived on West Main Street in Scottown -- "the street is filled with water, and it is pouring into my house, I can't leave my wife and baby."

He certainly could not.

The writer had never driven to Berwick by way of the back road, but there was nothing to do but to start, even though the mercury registered ten degrees below zero, and even though he had no sleep for forty-eight hours.

He reached Light Street without trouble, but that was as far as he could go, for it was yet dark, and he hadn't the slightest idea where to find the road. He waited in the village until another passing driver gave him the directions and then he started. Daylight came but it only seemed to get colder. He struck matches better to read the signboards along the way, and the nearer he got to Berwick, the farther off the sign boards indicated it to be. Almost frozen, he reached Berwick about 7:30 o'clock in the morning.

A good hot breakfast at the St. Charles – one of the kind Mrs. Ben Sponenberg used to prepare – put him in better spirits, and as he turned his horse toward Bloomsburg it was with the thought that he could soon go to bed.

Bloomsburg was reached in time, and the sight he saw when he drove into Main Street, was one he had never seen before and one he has never seen since.

Scottown was under water almost to the B. & S. railroad, and the street was filled with cows and hogs being driven to higher ground places of safety.

Then arose the cry, "The ice is moving."

It was word for which thousands throughout this section had been waiting for weeks.

All thought of bed was forgotten.

To the river everybody rushed and then back to his desk went a tired editor who wrote through the long hours of the night, and who did not reach his bed until almost six o'clock the next morning.

He had gone without a minute's sleep in more than seventy-two hours.

Then came the flood of 1936, and again there was placed a terrific strain on every employee.

Bloomsburg was a center of relief efforts for many hard hit towns. Information was sought by thousands as to the situation in other places and *The Morning Press* reporters and photographers covered the entire area, often by boat.

Deliveries of the paper were made to nearby towns in spite of disrupted

communications, a railroad work car being used to reach Catawissa one day. Trucks were also employed, traversing back roads when the water cut off the main highways.

Reporters and photographers went to Sunbury and Williamsport, both terribly hard hit, and The Morning Press engraving plant made it possible to produce pictures from throughout the area every morning.

Long hours meant not a thing.

Small wonder it is that the word "flood" has always brought back recollections in *The Morning Press* office.

The flood of 1936 is still fresh in the minds of everybody. So far as Columbia County is concerned, it was a freshet compared to the water siege in 1904, but a succession of them.

The present generation will glimpse a little of the terror of those days as these paragraphs are reviewed.

Recollection brings back many memories of the flood of 1904:

The buildup for the destructive floods came early in January when the unsuspecting public read their newspaper reports of nightly below-zero temperatures with little thought of the awful destruction which was to follow.

The first week in January of that year saw all records for this section (Bloomsburg) fractured to bits, Monday night, when the unofficial thermometer reading reached a low of minus twenty-six degrees -- fifty-eight degrees below the freezing point.

All that meant – ice.

The ice froze first in still water. Gradually the long stilly cold began to affect the water moving. In a week the Susquehanna river was frozen, quickly on the surface and then gradually, by degrees, deeper and deeper, until it was a solid glacier – but not moving slowly toward the sea.

For weeks in that January of 1904 the condition existed and then on January 22 a Saturday night, the peak of the cold snap broken, the hell that is nature on the loose broke.

At eight o'clock that fateful Saturday night the ice was apparently firm. Anxious residents stood on the Catawissa bridge, just looking up and down the river, waiting and watching and listening for the sound that might give them a clue to the exact hour that nature, long a sleeping giant, might awake.

The people who watched and discussed the river's condition in quiet knots could not detect even a semblance of a break. This fact lulled them into a sense of security. The crowd of hundreds dwindled down to a mere dozen about 8:30 o'clock.

Suddenly a cry was raised. Then another and still another. A faint stir in the ice was quickly noticed by first one of the dozen, then the dozen and suddenly the entire community awoke to the danger.

Alarm Goes Out

People rushed madly about gathering their personal belongings, prized livestock and their families. All knew in advance that once that ice gorge began moving they would have little time to get out of its path.

The ice at Roaringcreek gorged and back water menaced the residents of the lower section of Catawissa. By ten o'clock the water was up to the rails of the trolley road and the cars could go only as far as the Rupert Clubhouse. In an hour the water was up over the road at Boone's Dam and barely was clearing the railroad bridge above Catawissa.

Bloomsburg – meanwhile, was comparatively safe until early Sunday morning, when the whistle atop the Magee Carpet Company began a shrill, alarming wail that would not be stilled. The people in the Keystone Park section had to be rescued by boat as the waters of the Susquehanna crept up inch y inch, a silent foe that couldn't be fought.

Mrs. Urbanus McBride and her daughter, residents of the George Keiter farm, were engaged upon moving household goods to the second floor of the home when they were suddenly trapped. Lloyd Giger, of Magee Avenue, had only time to take his wife and children by the arm and run for it. Albert Rhodomoyer, William Ohl and Fletcher Kitchen, who rescued Keiter farmer residents, were themselves trapped and a rowboat came to their aid, picking them out of the flood waters.

The water reached its greatest height about midnight Sunday, when it reached a point nearly to the B. & S. tracks on West Fifth Street. Cellars were flooded below Leonard Street. On Monday morning the temperature dropped and flood waters dropped nine inches.

Fears Subside

Fears subsided by February 4, ten days later, although the river was still gorged with ice. Chief concern was the city papers had painted the flood disaster of national calamity proportions, with animal carcasses going downstream among the houses lifted from their foundations.

But a day or two later the situation took a turn for the worse, with waters steadily rising and hemming Bloomsburg like it had never been hemmed in before.

The entire valley from Wilkes-Barre to Sunbury was flooded, and people could not fully estimate either the extent of the damage nor foretell where next the river would strike.

Already forebodings were manifest. The water on Wednesday morning, February 10, was within inches of the disastrous level reached two weeks previously and it was obvious that only divine intervention could prevent further damage being wrought in the course of time. People during that fateful time merely waited and prayed.

Expert bridge builders and engineers, taking note that the ice was wedged against piers clear down to the bottom of the river's bed, indicated they were virtually certain the structure would be swept before any movement of the ice.

Crops Damaged

Thousands of dollars worth of property were ravaged. Winter crops were sheltered spot offered them, for the river's rampage included a distance of sixty miles up and down the rampant Susquehanna.

Two bridges, Berwick and Mifflinville – the latter a new one – were swept away and the Bloomsburg, the Reading Railway bridge at Rupert, the Catawissa bridge and

the Danville bridge tottered noticeably, ready to go with the slightest shove of the ice, apparently. Cold steel and stone could not stand the onslaught of ice.

On Tuesday afternoon, February 9, at four o'clock the first stir of the ice was noticed. A writer of that time described it thus:

"Suddenly there was a twitch of the trees above the (Berwick) bridge, followed by a groan of the ice. Then there was an instantaneous rise of water, and at the same time an elevation of the ice. The ice refused to relinquish its grasp, which virtue of the recent severe cold spell it had taken upon the trees, and they were lifted up by the roots and tossed into the turbulent stream.

"But the most exciting moment came when the bridge was torn from its foundation and tumbled into the river. To add to the horror of the situation, Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Nagle were crossing the structure at the time, wholly unmindful of their peril.

"The alarm had been sounded and a strong voice yelled out, 'off the bridge for your lives,' but not even an echo of the tragic words reached their cars. The bridge had separated for a space of nearly three feet when a spectator rushed to their aid and the trio reached the approach just as the structure collapsed.

"Part was carried on the ice to Mifflinville, where, striking the new county bridge, it too was swept downstream. The awful avalanche moved on down the river as far as Lime Ridge, where it gorged, and is now piled high in the air, forming an additional menace to property and perhaps to life."

Who the man was who made that brilliant rescue is lost to posterity or else it was the writer himself, for not a line about the narrow escape of Mr. and Mrs. Nagle is recorded that blustery February day.

With the 1250-foot Berwick and Mifflinville spans gone – the Berwick bridge had stood since 1837 – the mail into Bloomsburg had to be carried from Watsontown by way of Light Street. The last train to Bloomsburg was the day before the bridges went out. It had to go through three feet of water in some places to negotiate the trip.

Water was still several feet deep in Water Street, Catawissa, and all along the valley, from Wilkes-Barre, south, the lowlands along the bank of the Susquehanna were inundated. Fields were covered with blocks of ice.

This was a month after the temperature reached a law point of twenty-six below. And the worst was yet to come.

Not since 1865, thirty-seven years previously, with the exception of 1902, had the flats below Bloomsburg been covered with water. At Briarcreek the waters reached a mark of six feet higher than the first flood. At County Treasurer Ray Croop's farm the water crept up inch by inch until it suddenly, in a final rush, rapidly climbed over the first floor and sent the Croops rushing to safety just in the nick of time. The ice glare covered the farm. When it broke again large cakes cut down the orchard trees and left only shattered stumps.

THE PASSING THRONG

MARCH 11, 1941

We'll pick up today the thread of the story of the 1904 flood which reached its crest on March 9, but which had been in progress for more than a month.

On Thursday, February 18, the residents of the vicinity listened with a great deal of interest to the proposal of Alfred Cole of Jamison City, who told the commissioners that he would construct a heavy dam above the gorge, place heavy timbers on the ice about six feet apart and then cut the ice above the stringers about 200 feet, showing the broken pieces under that which was firm. This would form a sheet of water against the stringers, which would in turn force it over the dam on the gorge and cause the compact to honeycomb and to wear away.

Cole's proposition, for which he wanted $5,000 and a pass for life over two railroads, was not accepted by the commissioners as practical.

Despite all the ice and water the trains resumed service and mails came in regularly. Catawissa was thronged with visitors on the Sunday of February 20, 1904, as excursions over the railroads brought them in by the thousands. A conservative estimate made at the time of the height of the devastation reached 3,200 visitors.

Hotels were as the old saying went, "ate out of house and home," and butcher shops and stores disposed of their supplies of bologna, dried beef, crackers and cheese long before that day was over. The streets of the town presented a scene never witnessed before, all of which proves that the Yankees trader of 1930 is not such an unprecedented utilitarian as one would be led to believe by the so-called older generation.

The commissioners, turning down Mr. Cole's proposition a few days later, February 28, adopted a scheme put forth by Frank Creasy of Berwick. Lumber and oil were to be placed in the ice crevices and eventually fired. This, the commissioners hoped would be sufficient to start the gorge moving.

Meanwhile, during the lull, residents of the section feared that the melting snow in the mountains to the north of Bloomsburg and vicinity would increase the streams and eventually the river but would not melt the ice that jammed the river at this point. This, they feared, would force the waters of the Susquehanna out of their normal channel and over farm lands and town properties with favor toward none.

Conditions improved the next week and the moderate temperatures were enough so that the ice melted a little but not fast enough so that the river could not carry off the residue. The county commissioners, studying the situation and viewing spots where the jam of ice ranged in thickness from twenty-five to fifteen feet, decided the ice pack was too thick and would defy human power.

One who was in a position to know said: "All the petroleum, the high explosives and battering rams in the state won't move it. It matters not how they are employed, it is simply a waste of time to talk about, or even hope for relief except from a prolonged period of thawing as the water would rise faster than the ice would move and consequently seek the lowlands for outlet."

The crowd which visited Catawissa a week later was equally as great as the crowd which came the week before. The Philadelphia & Reading Railroad hauled at least seventy cars loaded with passengers and many others took advantage of transportation facilities on the D. L. & W. and Pennsylvania lines.

One estimate of the number of visitors reached 6,000.

Catawissa with its Main Street resembling Bloomsburg's Main Street on Centennial Day, was host to one train from Dushore, another from Williamsport and

five from the coal regions. The supply of foodstuffs was again inadequate and the forerunner of the modern hamburger stand was set upon in numerous places along the streets frequented by sightseers. The crowd was treated to "ice gorge sandwiches."

On March 3, a Thursday, there was little change in the ice situation. The weather had turned warmer and people lived in dread, momentarily expecting to hear the cry go up. "She's moving."

Meanwhile, the first death directly attributable to the flood conditions occurred when John H. Price, seventy, wearily watching the approach of the ice and water that were eating away at his possessions a lifetime of toil were required to build up, suddenly slumped over dead.

And then came the deluge of Wednesday, March 9.

Water swirling, ice-choked, muddy water, bubbled, foamed and eddied about the lowlands and high lands. It reached forty-one feet at its all-time high crest locally.

At Keystone Park, below the Carpet Mill, water licked at windows of second story residences. The fairgrounds were completely submerged. Cellars from Railroad Street south were flooded in Bloomsburg. All Scottown was under water. Boats rescued those who remained in their homes until the final minutes, hoping against hope, that the upward creeping waters would go back in their banks.

In the canal section of town water reached two feet about the high point recorded two weeks before. Two houses fell victims to the swirling water and more were teetering. The ice, however, had not broken on this March day which came in traditionally like a lamb, and was partly responsible for all the havoc that greeted one and all from vantage points of higher ground and comparative safety.

Business in Bloomsburg and the entire Susquehanna valley north to Wilkes-Barre and south far below Danville had long ago been practically suspended as one and all focused attention on the ice and water – and their damage.

Losses were appalling.

The river rose so quickly that Tuesday in March that it belied quick comprehension.

The Magee Carpet Company whistle sounded the alarm at quarter after ten o'clock that night. A man was standing at the corner of Fifth Street and Magee Avenue. One hour later the water was up to within twenty feet of the B. & S. Railroad and the yard surrounding the carpet mill and completely submerged.

All through the night people worked at getting their most prized possessions out of the houses and to safety, meanwhile casting a wary eye on the progress – steady and relentless – being made by the river.

Above Bloomsburg the waters were swirling in every direction of the compass, literally. Six feet of water at some places buried the tracks of the electric railway to the north. Cattle huddled on second floors of barns and faced the prospect of starvation if the currents of the Susquehanna gone made did not first strove in the puny man-made side of the farm buildings and plummet them to a death by drowning.

Risk of human life was voted down, although lack of food faced many a farmer's prize herds. The East Bloomsburg bridge appeared doomed. The ice had not moved but it was obviously due any moment.

The P. & R. Railroad bridge at Rupert was weighted down with heavy train of stone and pig iron, but little hope was held that this device would do much good.

Just before telephonic communication with Catawissa was disrupted the ice lifted two spans of the river bridge. Soon however, the ice jam stopped moving.

Suffering was widespread in Catawissa, more so, perhaps, than any other place, for Catawissa was within the immediate orbit of the ice jam. Hundreds were homeless. The covered bridge near the paper mill was swept away and carried downstream until it lodged against the P & R. bridge, creating greater strain on that structure.

Ice jam at the Catawissa Bridge in the 1904 flood before it was destroyed. The view is from the Catawissa side looking north.

The company, immediately sensing the danger thus occasioned set out to burn it but before a match was applied, however, it was learned that there had been a break in the Tidewater Pipe Line Company's main and the water was surfaced with oil, adding to the dangers.

The next day, however, the commissioners accepted an offer of $200 for the debris that had been the bridge and the torch was applied.

Catawissa and Nescopeck creeks broke loose that Monday and did considerable damage. The county bridge at McAuley's and Shumansville on the Catawissa creek, and the state bridges at Long Hollow were swept away.

Eight feet of ice covered the P. R. R.'s Danville and Hazleton line for two miles. On the Nescopeck creek the county bridges at Zenith, Evansville and Nescopeck were carried away. The Pennsylvania Railroad's Sunbury division was also flooded between Catawissa and South Danville.

Seventy rods of the dam at Sunbury were torn out. The ice gorge at Kipps Run was still intact and the gorge at Nanticoke remained.

Mountains of ice crushed against houses already water-filled along the banks of the Susquehanna between the Kingston-Wilkes-Barre area and the Danville-Riverside section. Up the river the railroad's passage through contiguous towns was stopped. In Wilkes-Barre the waters reached twenty-nine feet, only two feet lower than the all time previous high of 1902 and were still rising.

Danville had its worst flood the town ever knew. The covered bridge linking Danville with Riverside went out on Wednesday afternoon, March 9, and William Brown of Danville snapped about fifteen pictures of the break-up, printed them, and

sold them at ten cents each. He later said he made $450, paying his debts, he explained. Thirty-five years later, he still had the prints, as good as new, and the negatives, too.

At Danville the sheeting first was torn off the bridge by the ice and then the wooden super-structure crumbled and glided away on the surface of the ice.

The water played havoc coming into the business section. The water works was decommissioned. The town was without water, light, gas, electricity.

At 11:30 o'clock Wednesday night, March 9, 1904, the flood apparently reached its crest and there was a perceptible drop – but not before the house of Miss Clara Cleaver on the river road between here and Danville had been carried down by flood waters.

Scene is near the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station at the corner of West Fifth and Railroad Streets looking north. To the far right is Railroad Street and in the upper left corner is the fairgrounds. This photograph was taken on March 9, 1904, showing people near the station.

Daylight on March 10 revealed this picture [in Bloomsburg]:

At Leonard and Main Streets the back water from the river and that from Fishingcreek joined, forming a body extending from hill to hill.

The Neal [McKelvey & Neal Iron Furnace] cinder tip [east of Cherry Street and below Eighth Street] was entirely surrounded by water, but there was a fall of several inches during the night.

The entire length of Ninth Street from Robert Hartman's store down to Market Street was inundated. All the residences were flooded. The towpath was submerged from view. The Paul E. Wirt Fountain Pen Factory at the lower end of Iron Street [corner of Eighth and Iron Streets] had water almost up to the building.

The coal yard of P. G. Miller was flooded as were also the residences of Elmer Mears and Arlington Shultz, a little further to the west from Market Street.

The Catawissa bridge was down, except two spans on the northern bank of the river, and the trestle of the P. & R. Railroad Company's bridge at Rupert was also out.

Telephonic communication systems throughout the valley were demoralized.

Only the first span of the East Bloomsburg bridge was damaged and the entire structure considered much lighter than some of those which went out, was still firmly entrenched.

It was weeks before normal conditions again prevailed; many days before the railroads could operate.

The latter part of April saw the ice still piled on either side of the D. L. & W. tracks, as high as the tops of the trains in many places.