

COLUMBIA COUNTY CALAMITY

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The Society's most recent book, *Early Columbia County*, features on its cover the photo seen at right. It shows the proud construction crew at the successful completion in 1908 of the Mifflinville Bridge across the Susquehanna River. The photo doesn't reveal, however, the story behind the image: what the *Morning Press* called "one of the most appalling catastrophes in the annals of Columbia County."

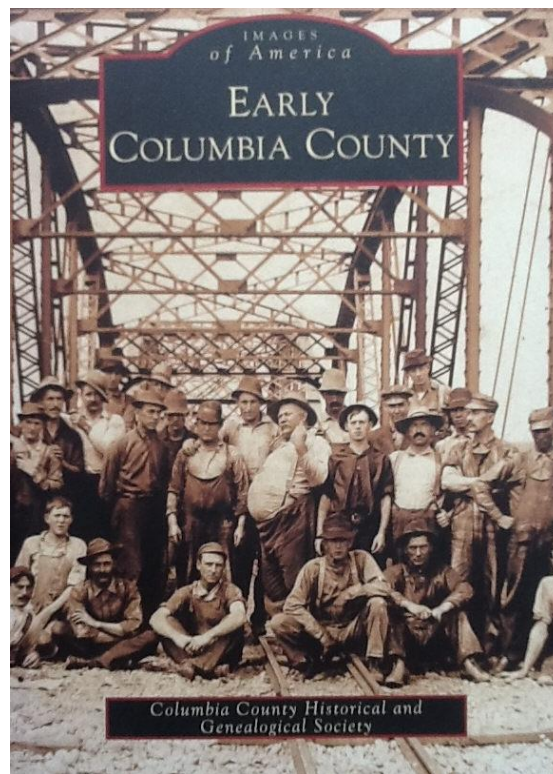
Work on the second span of the bridge was almost finished on Tuesday, December 10, 1907, near the end of the workday about five p.m., when disaster struck: the huge construction crane and the span itself collapsed and spilled forty workmen into the icy, rain-swollen waters of the river. Fifteen men were seriously injured and seven others were missing and feared dead.

The rescue effort began immediately, but it was hampered by darkness—which came almost immediately, a thick fog, and high water. Melting snow and heavy rains—1.66" fell in the previous two days—had raised the river level six feet overnight and brought a current so swift that small boats could not safely venture on the water. Brave rescuers nonetheless snatched injured men from the wreckage and conveyed them to Mifflinville, where all the town's doctors gathered to treat the wounded.

The injured men included *W. Byer* of York, broken back and dislocated shoulder; *Newton Dunlap*, Bellefonte, bruised legs; *John Fisher*, Selinsgrove, broken arm; *Harry C. Goodling*, Hoffer, fractured elbow; brothers *Percival* and *Howard Reighenbach* of McKees Half Falls (below Selinsgrove), each with a broken leg; *Ray Sherwood* of Meshoppen, broken spine and punctured skull; *W. Werking*, Snyder County, cuts and bruises.

Volunteers lined both riverbanks below the bridge all the way to Bloomsburg, looking for bodies to float by—but none was seen. The next morning, the search for the missing men was resumed. The seven men were thought to be trapped in the twisted wreckage, but because of the swift current little could be done at first. In fact, no body was recovered for six days and some bodies were found months later and over a hundred miles downriver.

As the list of injured suggests, most of the workers were not local men but had come from distant towns to work on the bridge; they boarded with families in Mifflinville. Three of the dead, however, were from Mifflinville and one from Beaver Township, so the disaster was keenly felt in the county.



The seven missing men were:

A. Wilson Fahs, the ironwork foreman, recently of Mifflinville though originally from Selinsgrove; age 40, he was married with one child.

Charles Kreitzer of McKees Half Falls, age 23, the only support of a widowed mother.

Adam Tritt, age 21, son of a farm family in Beaver Valley, Columbia County, was married with two children.

Irvin Updegraff, age 24, of McKees Half Falls, married with one child.

Adam Musselman, Selinsgrove, age 25, was married and the father of two children.

George Faux, a Mifflinville resident who lived on the farm of C. W. Miller; he was survived by his wife and three daughters.

Millard O. Bowman, also of Mifflinville, age 23, son of P. Z. Bowman, was married and had a young child.

When the river receded after several days, searchers searched diligently through the mass of wreckage as they lifted out the fallen girders. On December 16th, almost a week after the tragedy, foreman A. W. Fahs was found in the wreckage; his body was standing erect among the girders underwater, trapped by one foot.

In the spring, three months later, three bodies were found downriver. On March 5th at Steelton just below Harrisburg, the body of George B. Faux was found wrapped in reeds on the shore. Then on March 13th, Charles Kreitzer's body was espied at a pier of the East Bloomsburg bridge by Evan Ale, a route driver for the Moyer Drug Company. This body was positively identified by having four false teeth along with a pocket watch that had been given the dead man by his brother.

Four days later, on March 17th, another body was discovered far downstream at Turtle Point, Maryland, on Chesapeake Bay fourteen miles south of Havre de Grace. Badly decomposed, the body was identified as that of Adam Tritt thanks to a receipt in his shirt pocket for a money order purchased at Mifflinville the day before the bridge collapse.

When the disaster happened, most of the workmen were on the tall moving crane, called a 'traveler' (see photo at right); some of them were a hundred feet above the water. The traveler ran on rails at the outer edge of the bridge roadway; it was used to erect the arch of steel girders that held up each span between the stone piers. Witnesses said that the traveler collapsed first, bringing the second span down with it. Ironically, the second span was within a few minutes of being completed, lacking only a few rivets to be secured.

Officials from the York Bridge Company and the state arrived the morning after the collapse. There was a touching scene at 8 a.m. when the work crew gathered, a number with heads bandaged, arms in slings or standing on crutches. The officials shook hands with them while not a word was spoken. The officials investigated, heard the eyewitnesses and studied the wreckage, but were unable to assign a specific cause for the accident. The high water was thought to have undermined the "false work" or temporary crib which supported the traveler.

One of the most pathetic stories of the event is that of the death of Irvin Updegraff. Just after the collapse he appeared struggling above the river surface

downstream from the bridge but none of the workmen could reach him. His arm could be seen for some time as he floated away, but then disappeared from sight.

The bridge project was dogged by so much misfortune that local people began to call it a *hoodoo*—a case of extreme bad luck or a curse. The project was an urgent one: the great flood of 1904 had carried away the previous bridge (see photo above). A temporary ferry provided only a poor substitute to the workers needing to get to jobs in Berwick or farmers taking perishables to market. The ferry was slow and could not operate at all in occasional periods of very low or very high water or when the river iced over.

The county took many months to decide to rebuild the fallen bridge, and then when work was well along the Pennsylvania Railroad won an injunction to stop the work: the railroad wanted the bridge raised so that it would include an overpass over the PRR track along the river at Mifflinville, eliminating the hazardous grade crossing. Finally, after a legislative struggle, the Commonwealth agreed to take over the project and build the bridge with state money; a contract was awarded to the York Bridge Company. Each of these steps involved months of delay.

Then came the fatal collapse after only one span was finished, and the delay of weeks until the high water subsided so that the mass of steel could be removed. Even then, the bad luck continued: the barge and crane engaged in removing the wreckage sank into the river!

Another ironic misfortune hit one of the local workers. *Jacob Johnson* of Bloomsburg, veteran of the Spanish-American War, was among the more fortunate ones when the bridge fell—he toppled into the river from the traveler and was rescued with torn ribcage and leg wounds but no critical injuries. He was taken on the Pennsylvania RR evening train to East Bloomsburg and thence to his home. He soon recovered sufficiently that he again joined the work crew after construction restarted. Four months later, however, he was struck by a snapped guy wire and he died in hospital on April 7th.

Despite all this *hoodoo*, the bridge was finally completed and opened to traffic on the last day of August, 1908. Large crowds rode the trolleys from Bloomsburg, Berwick and other towns to the Willow Springs stop so they could walk across the bridge. “It was a long time coming,” opined the *Morning Press*, “but the unanimous opinion is, that it has all been worth while. It is a mighty handsome bridge.”

The memory of the tragic events faded quickly. On the one-year anniversary of the collapse in December of 1908, the *Morning Press* printed not a word about the disaster. The bridge, though, survived and served well for over eighty years until it was replaced by a broad concrete roadway in the 1990s.

Based on contemporary news stories in the *Morning Press*. Thanks to Executive Director Bonnie Farver for suggesting this topic and compiling the newspaper articles.

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