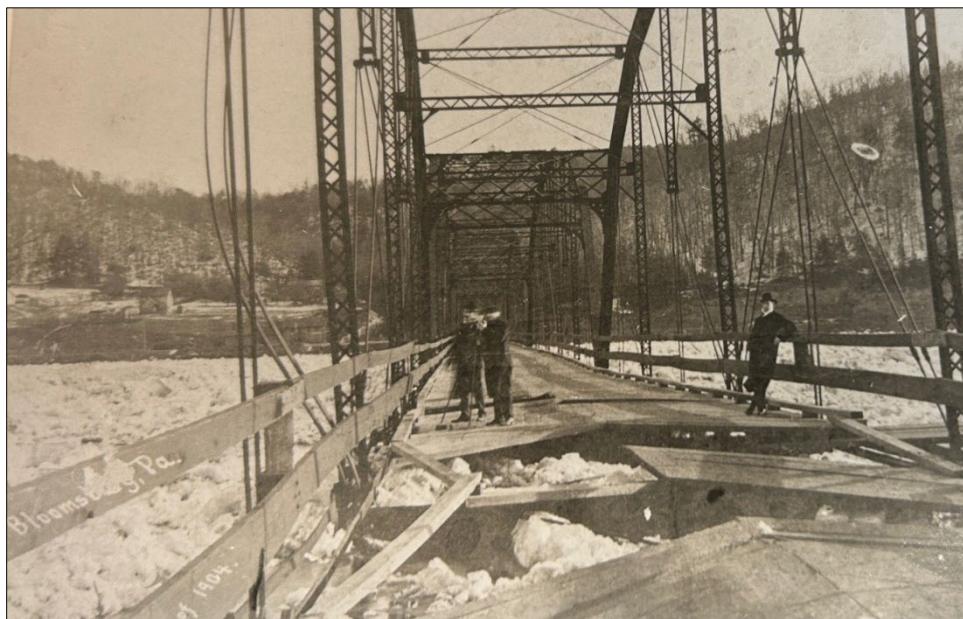


The Flood of 1904

Dani Crossley

In *The Morning Press* of March 7, 1904, 121 years ago, word was given that high waters were receding. The tracks between Catawissa and Rupert had been covered. The river road to the East Bloomsburg bridge was cut off by the water which backed over the flats. Then an innocuous statement appeared in the following paragraph: “*The situation along the Susquehanna appeared a trifle brighter early this morning, but with the present weather conditions and forecast for today, more high water may follow.*”

Three days later a very alarming account of the flood and breaking of the ice gorge headlined the very same newspaper. *UNPRECEDENTED RUIN MARKS BREAKING OF THE ICE GORGE ALONG SUSQUEHANNA RIVER. FOUR BRIDGES ARE SWEPT AWAY. Waters, at an Early Hour This Morning, Recede Slowly, and General Belief is That Maximum Height Has At Last Been Reached.*”



Several men standing on the East Bloomsburg bridge, apparently unconcerned ice is coming up through the floor, March 1904

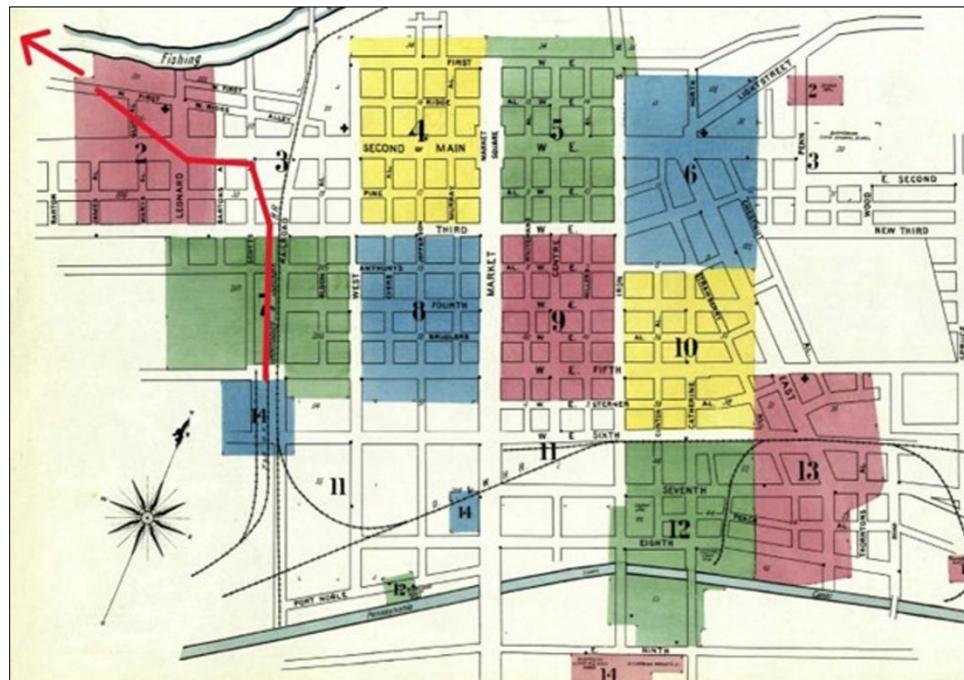
Declared “*without a doubt the worst flood in the history of the Susquehanna Valley,*” waters finally began receding around 3 a.m. after reaching a height of 31 feet. This was only the beginning of the horror. Movement of built-up ice wrought damage in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. The Danville-Riverside Bridge, the Catawissa bridge, the Pennsylvania trestling, with four loaded cars, and the Catawissa covered bridge, “*were carried away on the breast of the ice and water.*”

The newspaper article described how different areas/people were affected by the flood. Transcribed below is the description of what happened to the property of one John Shrey (minus a sentence that was unreadable) and the approximate limits of the inundation in town. Many of us now reading this lived through the flood of September 2011 where we witnessed similar

destruction and loss. The section then following describes the fate of the four bridges mentioned in the headline.

"The lower end of Catherine Street is flooded and through the fields and the grove below the cinder tip, across these lowlands flows a raging torrent. In the midst of this torrent stood the residence of John Shrey, on East Eleventh Street, a frame structure two and one-half stories high. In each of the previous floods this house had been surrounded and after the second flood all the furniture excepting three stoves was taken from the house. The Shrey family have been staying at the home of A. J. Eckenrode, on East Street."

Yesterday morning about half-past nine o'clock the water was about two feet deep in the first floor of the Shrey house. The current was very swift and was pushing strongly against the structure. Then suddenly a large mass of ice broke loose from the gorge and flowing over the Hendershott farm struck the corner of the house with terrific force, caving the one end in completely. The house toppled and the ice immediately piled up against it about four feet high...and passed about twenty feet down the stream. There it stopped and remained until about one o'clock yesterday afternoon. Then it yielded to the force of the water and the small kitchen gable broke loose from the structure and floated down the stream past Dieffenbach's ice house to Market Street.



The marked-up picture above (map taken from the 1907 Sanford insurance maps on the Penn State library's website), shows the area in the west end of town affected by the flood. The red arrow is pointed towards the Red Rock bridge near Fernville. Basically, all the area below 9th Street was also flooded.

The upper story of the house was torn off at the same time and it floated down the stream to a knoll where it held firm and there it lay last night about 200 feet below its original site. Besides the range, the large parlor heater and smaller stove, nothing of any value was in the house."

"To roughly delineate the limits of the flood's encroaches in Scottown, if a line were drawn from the Red Rock bridge to the intersection of Main and Leonard Streets, the water line could be clearly marked in that section. Then continue the line from the intersection of Main and Leonard streets to the alley above the residence of George W. Corell, on Main Street, below Railroad Street, then from that point to the residence of Mrs. Phoebe Ohl, the third home below Railroad Street on the north side of West Third Street and from there to the Philadelphia and Reading station on West Fifth Street, this line would mark the limits of the greatest flood in the history of the town."



Although not much over knee-high at this point, the river made going by boat the only way to stay dry when getting around Espy in March 1904

A particularly sad description was the situation in Espy.

"At a late hour last night the whole town of Espy from the aqueduct down to the residence of Frank Ringrose at the lower end of the town was submerged in water to a depth varying from two to five feet. This condition existed not only on the Main street but extended back almost to the railroad and rendered approach to the D. L. and W. station impossible even if the road had been in operation. Instead of horse and wagons, the streets were filled with boats removing the people from their homes."

The road leading to the station was inundated to a depth of four feet, and on the Main street in front of the hotel the water was between two and three feet deep. While the situation was extremely critical and the people were preparing for the worst, they were encouraged and cheered by the fact that the water was receding."

The description of what happened to the four bridges from the buildup of ice on the river follows.

"Catawissa, which has been forced to bear the brunt of the high water as have few towns, was dealt another heavy blow yesterday and one which will also affect Bloomsburg and the Columbia and Montour Electric Railroad, when the fine new river bridge was carried away by the movement of the mighty gorge. It was 11:30 o'clock when the ice moved at Catawissa and as it

pushed its way down the river for a distance of 100 feet, it lifted the second span of the river bridge from the Catawissa end and carried it down the river, a distance of 100 feet. The two remaining spans broke away into the river last night at 9:30 o'clock.

Not satisfied with the destruction of this bridge the same movement of the ice carried away the Pennsylvania trestling that spans the Catawissa creek and with it there was carried away four cars loaded with ballast.

The only bridge that connected Catawissa with the South Side—that at the foot of Second Street—was carried away by the flood yesterday morning. This was the bridge that had been bearing the brunt of several floods and nothing else was expected. It leaves the South Side in a particularly bad way. The water just before it fell last night had almost entered the new Philadelphia and Reading station. On all sides the scenes of the former floods were repeated, only that this time it was worse than ever before.



Sightseers on the Susquehanna River bridge to Catawissa, before the ice lifted the iron spans off the stone piers and mangled them into junk metal

The river bridge at Catawissa which was carried away by the flood yesterday, was erected by the Penn Bridge company for the State in 1897, at a cost of about \$80,000 and was 1232 feet in length and consisted of five spans. It was a steel structure and was one of the handsomest and most substantial bridges across the Susquehanna River. It was erected during the administration of Messrs. Ikeler, Swank and Utt as county commissioners, and was the first bridge built in the county by the State under the new law relating the replacing by the State of county bridges which were destroyed.

This bridge was built to replace one which had been blown from its piers by a wind storm which prevailed in this section, in 1896. Up to 1892 the bridge was the property of the Columbia Bridge Co. and was a toll bridge. In this year after legal proceedings, it was purchased by the county and declared a free bridge and thrown open to the public use and thus maintained until it

was blown away after which the structure recently destroyed was erected. The loss of this bridge will be felt by the whole county, as it was the principal means of communications between the northern and southern ends of the county. To the citizens of Catawissa, the loss will be particularly heavy as it will cut off their trolley communications with this place as the bridge was used as the road bed of the trolley in crossing the river."

The article in its entirety can be read using the link in the Members Only section to Newspapers.com and choosing Bloomsburg for the location and 1904 for the year with "flood" as the keyword. The photos are all from the CCHGS photo collection.