

## **The Great 1850 Flood of Nescopeck Creek**

By Chris Sanders

This area is known for its many memorable floods, but has anyone heard of the great 1850 flood of Nescopeck Creek in which twenty lives were lost? According to an account in The Berwick Telegraph, published Thursday, September 5, 1850, this flood was “one of the most destructive floods to life and property which this section of the country has ever seen.”

The meaning of the Creek’s name is “deep black waters.” During part of the year it is impossible to navigate due to rapids, flooding and tight bends. The creek lived up to its name. On that particular day the creek, a 37-mile tributary of the Susquehanna River in the coal region of Pennsylvania, kept rising moderately in the night until 8:00 a.m. It then began to rise very rapidly and soon overspread its highest banks carrying with it houses, barns, mills, trees and everything that got in its way. The water was 21 feet above its normal level and reached its height about 11:00 a.m.

The destruction was appalling with the greatest damage done at the Nescopeck Forge, which made bar iron. Twenty lives were lost and five houses, the smith shop, carpenter shop and coal house full of charcoal were swept away. The forge was left standing, but the dams and races were so damaged they were considered irreparable. Damage was estimated at \$8000.00

The persons drowned were workmen and their families:

Mrs. Mary Smith, (wife of Samuel Smith) and child; Wm. Custiboche; John Birket, and his wife and five children, viz—Catherine, Augustus, Samuel, William and Lydia—the latter was married to Wm. Reichart; Mrs. Reichart, (wife of Anthony Reichart) and three children, viz—Lucinda, Esther and Marie; Catharine Fink, (wife of Peter Fink) and child; Celesta Hewet; Elizabeth Parks (wife of Ephraim Parks, a colored man) and child; and an old lady by the name of Reinbolt.

Mr. John Dreisbach, who lived two miles up the creek above the forge, lost his grist mill, saw mill, house and outbuildings. Only the barn was left standing; his losses being around \$4000.00 Two houses came down the creek by the forge with all their furniture, one of which was supposed to be Mr. Dreisbach’s.

Mr. David Evans, who owned the large flour mill about one mile below the forge and a mile from the river, had his saw mill, two barns and outbuildings taken away and his flour mill seriously damaged, losses of about \$3000.00. Mr. Evans and his family were trapped in their house for several hours with the flood waters surrounding them and coming in upon the floor with a deep and swift current. The Evans family in terror watched furniture, every article of household items and wrecked houses with helpless people surge by while onlookers standing near the bank could only stare in horror at the house, a single speck, surrounded by the swift flood and the persons inside looking out the windows for help that could not be given.

Luckily the Evans family had guardian angels in the form of Frank Gingles and Samuel Williams, who brought a batteau from the river and went to their rescue. Observers could not

believe that such a frail boat could survive the raging flood, but five persons left the house and landed safely in the eddy below.

Mr. George Westler and his family were rescued in the same way from their house at Nescopeck Forge by Peter Shiner. He had his boat taken from the river over the hill and landed at the creek directly above the house in which 28 of the workmen and their families had gathered, then pushed out upon the swift flood into turbid waves created by the dam. But trying to reach the families on the roof who were clinging to each other, he was carried past like a bubble, and they were swept away in the torrent.

Three people were saved however. Anthony Reichart was picked up about the time he was being carried into the river. Samuel Smith was rescued by John Williams and Thomas Stackhouse who had also brought a boat to Evans' mill to help the victims. The third was Ephraim Parks, a colored man, who was rescued by John Chamberlain and Thomas Stackhouse.

The article stated in parentheses that "the Ephraim Parks mentioned as having been rescued, afterwards moved to Bloomsburg where he lived many years....The Mrs. Parks and child drowned were his wife and child."

The 1850 census shows the depressing evidence of the horrible flood. By comparing the names of the deceased with those on the census, it was evident that a whole neighborhood, and probably most of the forge workers, was wiped out. Such a devastating tragedy.

The life of Ephraim Parks, the "colored man" mentioned, who was miraculously plucked from the muddy waters, has been followed in another newsletter article. And we now know there was one fewer victim of the Great Flood—his daughter, Martha, who, although listed as "drowned," actually survived and lived in Bloomsburg! Yes, sometimes news can be blessedly wrong!