

Some Flood History

The Susquehanna River is a bucolic sight as it passes Lewisburg and the river towns of Union County. The nation's longest non-navigable river, in central Pennsylvania it is a wide, shallow resource for fishing and boating. However, on occasion it becomes a raging torrent.

Major floods have been recorded at least nine times in the last 125 years.

The first flood of which the Union County Historical Society has photos, was in June 1889. Lewisburg's dirt streets were underwater, and the river bridge was destroyed.

In March 1936, a result of heavy rain and melting winter snows, the Susquehanna valley saw its next significant flood. Thousands left their homes. Telephone, telegraph and electric lines were down, and heating/cooking gas service was cut off. The river flooded over Lewisburg almost to Fairground Road. (Most of Milton and Sunbury were also under water.)

One of the most devastating floods occurred June 21-22, 1972. Hurricane Agnes developed over the Gulf of Mexico and traveled up the east coast of the US along with a secondary low that contributed to the storm's effect. Agnes was one of the largest June hurricanes on record. Mid-Atlantic states were drenched with 6 to 12 inches of rain, with some areas receiving even more. The most severe flooding occurred in the Chesapeake/Susquehanna watershed.

The flood of 1972 was unlike any before. Buffalo Creek (north of town), Bull Run (through the middle of town) and the Susquehanna River, all exceeded flood stage. The only areas of town that were not under some amount of water were the relatively higher ground in the center of town and University Hill at Bucknell.

As Lois Kalp wrote in *A Town on the Susquehanna*: "the most distinctive feature of the disaster was the rush of Bull Run from the west in oceanic waves that were terrifying to the viewer....ruined houses, wrecked bridges, washed-out roads, uprooted trees, and debris greeted the eyes of stunned unbelieving onlookers."

Four local people lost their lives. Chief of Police Gordon Hufnagle drowned trying to save Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Murphy, who were swept downriver to Winfield, and Mrs. William Minium was killed when her house collapsed.

According to the *Mifflinburg Telegraph*, June 29, 1972, Congressman Herman Schneebli was initially unable to visit the flood-stricken area of his district because the airports were not functioning and roads were closed. Even phone service was difficult. Schneebli, Senator Hugh Scott and Governor Milton Shapp worked together to coordinate relief efforts.

Federal Assistance to flood victims in 1972 included: food and food stamps; rent-free temporary housing for up to one year; federal government payment for clean-up and repairing bridges, highways and public facilities; unemployment compensation for those who lost their jobs because of the flood; and long-term, low-interest loans.

In Lewisburg, a Flood Plan Ordinance was developed to control building in low-lying areas and redevelop parts of town damaged by the 1972 flood. It was necessary to demolish buildings along Lewisburg's 5th Street due to extensive damage. The beautiful Hufnagle Park, in the center of Lewisburg, was built to honor Gordon Hufnagle's memory.

Photos of floods and other events are featured in the Society's new pictorial history books of Union County, *Lewisburg* and *Union County River Towns*.



Brown Street in Lewisburg - 1936 Flood



Market & Fifth Streets in Lewisburg - 1972 Flood