

Flooding on the Susquehanna West Branch by Dan McDavitt

The January 15, 1915 article in the **Lewisburg Journal** read *Boat Capsized in Swollen River*. It detailed the previous Tuesday experience of three Watsonstown Brick plant employees. The men from White Deer rowed to and from work. That afternoon, they departed in their boat when the “swift water caught the boat and capsized it.” Two men swam to a shore “lined with ice.” The third individual could not swim and “he clung to the overturned boat.” A rope was procured from a local farmer and he was saved.

The following week an essay by **J. Herbert Walker** entitled *Flood Years of the Susquehanna’s West Branch* was featured. The Susquehanna was “usually a shallow stream but there were times when the river ... became a current of raging water.” He noted Indians had recounted, on average, a “great flood occurred every fourteen years.” Walker mentioned four major floods from the 18th century between 1744 and 1800. Those floods were mostly “in the spring of the year and the waters increased by the rains and the melting of the snows...” The March 15, 1784, event was called “the ice flood” and it “exceeded *all degrees known before*.” The October 1786 flood “was characterized as the Pumpkin Flood.”

Walker also documented 19th century floods. The first, with detail, began the winter of 1828 – 29. Rain for the first seventy days was followed by a rapid freeze and deep snows. Spring arrived late in 1829 with heavy rain. The 1829 flood “arose to a height not equaled in previous years.” On October 13, 1846, “bridges suffered greatly” between Milton and Harrisburg. Three employees were working at the Farmer’s Store on Turtle Creek, south of Lewisburg. That evening they embarked in a boat to check on a warehouse on the far side of the creek. Returning, a mill-dam gave way, and their boat encountered both impounded water and logs from the dam. All three men died. The water “reached a higher point at the mouth of Turtle Creek, than it had at any previous time.”

During the March 17, 1865 flood, “the old covered bridge that stood at the foot of Market Street, Lewisburg was swept away...other bridges all along the stream were swept away...” The flood was caused by “the warm south-west wind and rain rapidly melting the body of snow.” At Williamsport, flood-water “attained a height of 28 feet.”

“The greatest flood of all...was the memorable flood of June 1, 1889.” Like the flood of 1865 “the wind, blowing from the south-west, presaged trouble.... rain fell incessantly for forty-eight hours.” The water reached 33 feet at Williamsport and 28 feet at Lewisburg. Three-fourths of towns between Lock Haven and Sunbury were inundated.

Record-keeping began on the Susquehanna River Basin in 1810

The U. S. Geological Survey, and other agencies, indicate the Susquehanna is one of the most flood prone and costly of all U. S. watersheds. It is one of the oldest rivers in the world and its waters flow over bedrock. It is wide and shallow; excessive water can only spread out as its banks are relatively low. Fourteen major floods are recorded since 1810, (averaging one every fourteen years). The U.S. G.S. estimates that 83% of 1,400 riverside communities have residents and businesses in flood prone areas. Of 20th century floods, the March 17, 1936 flood was reckoned to be the most devastating, until the 1972 Agnes Flood exceeded the 1936 flood by six feet and became the nation’s most expensive natural disaster until Hurricane Andrew (1992).

If Mr. Walker’s historical essay from 100 years ago was intended as a harbinger, nature has proved him correct, and we have learned little since then.



The flood of 1889 destroyed the bridge over the Susquehanna at Lewisburg.



A view of a tranquil Susquehanna West Branch River.