

The Good with the Bad:

Yellow Journalism and the Relief It Brought for the Johnstown Flood of 1889

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I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work. *Ashleigh Eileen Liang Foster*

## Abstract

The Johnstown Flood of 1889 caused by the cataclysmic breaking of the South Fork Lake Dam atop the Conemaugh Valley in Pennsylvania resulted in the loss of over two thousand lives. Following the tragedy, thousands of people made their way to Johnstown, the epicenter of the destruction caused by the flood. Though the widespread coverage of the event may have inspired what some would call “human vultures” to come to Johnstown with opportunist hopes of conning survivors or treasure hunting for disaster relics, it also inspired people nationwide to donate food, clothing, cash, and various other items. Though the charitable donations and relief workers were welcome, and the self-indulgent presence of unhelpful onlookers was not, the reports of the magnitude of this tragic event beckoned to both helpful and hindering entities.

When tragedy strikes a nation, the news and reports about it soon appear. The Johnstown Flood of 1889 occurred when the South Fork Dam broke after heavy rain pushed the neglected dam to its limit and “more than 400 million cubic feet of water, about 20 million tons,” rushed down the Conemaugh Valley, wiping out entire towns and picking up buildings, livestock, and humans along the way.<sup>1</sup> Over two thousand lives were lost in the flood and the fire that destroyed much of what the waters did not. Following the devastating flood waters came the flood of relief workers, reporters, and disaster tourists that intermingled with the frenzied crowds of grieving survivors.

The tragedies caused by the flood incited nationwide news reports of its details. Relief efforts sprung quickly, including the outpouring of donations and the recruitment of volunteer laborers. Though these benevolent responses to such a tragedy were certainly necessary to provide relief, they often created adverse effects as well. In receiving massive amounts of news coverage and aid, additional solutions had to be formed for the problems that accompanied them. The problems were an inevitable aspect of the “monumental relief work”<sup>2</sup> responding to the “awful calamity”<sup>3</sup> that the Johnstown Flood truly was. Just as the survivors pressed on through the terrible disaster, they would also endure whatever issues that coincided with the relief being provided for it.

No amount of money or donations would bring back the loss of property, life, and normalcy that the survivors of the Johnstown Flood had experienced. The website for the Johnstown Flood Museum states that seventeen million dollars of property was damaged or

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<sup>1</sup>Al Roker, *Ruthless Tide: The Heroes and Villains of the Johnstown Flood, America's Astonishing Gilded Age Disaster* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 12.

<sup>2</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 231.

<sup>3</sup>“Many Lives Lost,” *Lancaster (PA) Daily Intelligencer*, June 1, 1889.

destroyed; 2,209 lives were lost, with over seven hundred fifty victims left unidentified; husbands and wives were left widowed, children became orphans. The rushing flood of twenty million tons of water traveled fourteen miles through the Conemaugh Valley at speeds reaching forty miles per hour at waves up to forty feet high.<sup>4</sup> What the water upheaved as it rushed through the valley became debris that piled at the Stone Bridge in Johnstown and “exploded into flame with molten steel and natural gas,” causing more destruction. Many who survived the flood but were drifting atop the rushing waters met their ends at the fiery bridge.<sup>5</sup>

These already tragic details were often exaggerated in the newspaper articles that reported on them. *The Evening Journal*, a newspaper published in Wilmington, Delaware, released an article three days after the flood titled “10,000 Souls Dead.” In it they state, “from the best information obtainable at this hour, it would seem that the total number lost will not fall below 8,000 and it may go over 10,000.”<sup>6</sup> Ten thousand was the estimated number of lives lost by *The Memphis Appeal* as well. In their article titled “10,000 Lost,” they ensure that “ten thousand souls [were] lost,” and that “the number will certainly reach this awful figure.”<sup>7</sup>

Although the initially reported death tolls were inaccurate, it can be understood why reporters inflated the number of people who perished in what they were regarding as “the most terrible catastrophe in America’s records.”<sup>8</sup> Not only would the higher, more devastating number of lives lost promote provocative headlines and awe readers, but also because the first reporters

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<sup>4</sup>Johnstown Flood Museum, Johnstown Area Heritage Association, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.jaha.org/attractions/johnstown-flood-museum/flood-history/facts-about-the-1889-flood/>.

<sup>5</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 259.

<sup>6</sup>“10,000 Souls Dead,” *Evening Journal* (Wilmington, DE), June 3, 1889.

<sup>7</sup>“10,000 Lost,” *Memphis (TN) Appeal*, June 2, 1889.

<sup>8</sup>“Engulfed,” *Butler (MO) Weekly Times*, June 5, 1889.

to break the story of the Johnstown Flood had filed stories that were “being constructed” as they “interview[ed] an excited, horrified crowd” that was “still twenty miles from their real story.”<sup>9</sup>

Reporters had been slowly making their way closer and closer to the Johnstown, which was the epicenter of the wreckage. The flood caused damage all along the way, not allowing train cars to move closer to the destroyed town. The reporters recorded accounts from witnesses who would share “the wildest stories . . . many of them true.”<sup>10</sup> *The Wheeling Daily Intelligencer* details the difficulties reporters experienced in trying to break the devastating story in their June first article titled “Frightful.” The article reported that “the wires are all down and no trains are running east of Blairesville . . . twenty-five miles west of Johnstown. There is no way to get to the scene of the disaster and full particulars can hardly be obtained to-night, although every effort is being made to do so.”<sup>11</sup>

Once the reporters arrived, the terrifying language they used in their articles did seem necessary to describe the horrifying wreckage witnessed at Johnstown. In the *Indianapolis Journal* article titled “The Valley of Death,” the reporter finds it difficult to describe the scene, stating “the scene to-day in one of the most harrowing possible for the imagination of man to conceive,” again reiterating “the awfulness of the scene defies language to depict, as it does the imagination to conceive of.” If statements like “the scene was horrible beyond description,” caused readers to long for more details, the reporter attempted to help: “From infancy, a few days old, to the wasted figures of age, people were burned before the eyes of beholders, and no rescue from such a fate was possible.”<sup>12</sup> If what was expressly described in the article was already so

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<sup>9</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 204.

<sup>10</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 205.

<sup>11</sup>“Frightful,” *Wheeling (WV) Daily Intelligencer*, June 1, 1889.

<sup>12</sup>“Valley of Death,” *Indianapolis (IN) Journal*, June 2, 1889.

awful, how much more tragic could the scenes which the reporter was at a loss for words be? Descriptions of the carnage like “when a form is seen to drop down deeper into the flames, from the burning away of supports, shrieks pierce the air like a wail from a lost soul,” gave readers a glimpse of the terrible scenes at Johnstown. Statements such as “each passing hour increases the magnitude of the Johnstown disaster,” emphasized the incomprehensible horrors that onlookers were witnessing.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the dreadful reports of loss and suffering were the reports of inspirational heroism. In the *South Branch Intelligencer*'s article titled “The Johnstown Horror,” a story is told of “a nameless Paul Revere” and his “hero's ride to death.” The article describes the event of a man “mounted on a big bay horse,” warning everyone to get to safety, shouting “run for your lives to the hills! Run to the hills!” The selfless, unknown man warning people of impending disaster was described to have met his demise as he was outracing the flood waves: “Just as he turned across the railroad bridge the mighty wave fell upon him, and rider, horse, and bridge went out into chaos together.”<sup>14</sup> The story of this unknown “Paul Revere” was a “fable [that] had been concocted right after the flood itself.” Even if it was “physically impossible” for such a tale to be truthful, readers considered it “too good to be true, but too good not to believe.”<sup>15</sup>

Another tale, a true and not concocted one, was the survival story of young Gertrude Quinn. Gertrude was six years old at the time of the flood. She had been rescued by Maxwell McCachren who threw her to safety from out of the water that was headed directly towards the fire at the Stone Bridge. “The story of the throw was gold” for reporters who were constantly looking for the next tear-jerking, awe-inspiring, or unbelievably tragic story to report on. “The

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>“The Johnstown Horror,” *South Branch Intelligencer* (Romney, WV), June 14, 1889.

<sup>15</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 273.

press loved Gertrude's story," though Gertrude herself was still too traumatized to speak about it.<sup>16</sup>

Just as there were reporters eager to discover stories, photographers were arriving in town as well. David McCullough states in his 1968 book, *The Johnstown Flood*, "at one point it was estimated that there were no less than 200 amateur photographers about town, enough in any case that they had become a nuisance."<sup>17</sup> Unhelpful outsiders had come to the demolished town to photograph the destruction "from virtually every angle,"<sup>18</sup> and those pictures would eventually show up "on 3-D viewers, postcards, and as illustrations for books."<sup>19</sup> One photographer even went so far as to stage a dramatic photograph by having a man lie in the street to pose as a corpse. The unofficial solution to the problem of self-indulgent gawkers getting in the way of relief efforts was to spread word that "if you were an able-bodied man but had no official business in town, then you had to work if you wanted to stay on."<sup>20</sup>

From the devastating newspaper reports to the shocking photographs of "upturned houses,"<sup>21</sup> people nationwide were consuming the stories and sights of the aftermath of the tragic Johnstown Flood. Though shocking headlines and overestimated death tolls were common among initial newspaper reports, the depictions of the scenes of death and destruction were not as greatly exaggerated. Even though reporters may have been using yellow journalism tactics to a degree, the sights seen at the wreckage of Johnstown were indeed gruesome. A submerged town, drifting corpses, and fiery ruins could not be described as any less horrifying as they truly

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<sup>16</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 236.

<sup>17</sup>David G. McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 217.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 271.

<sup>20</sup>McCullough, *Johnstown Flood*, 218.

<sup>21</sup>McCullough, *Johnstown Flood*, 217.

were. However, some papers did take part in outright fabrication of stories, telling “tales of wild dogs ravaging the graves of flood victims and devouring corpses by the dozens.”<sup>22</sup> Newspaper publishers that indulge in using yellow journalism can be described as “profit motivated purveyor[s] of cheap thrills and vicarious experiences.”<sup>23</sup>

Whatever the motivation was for the newspapers to print tall tales or blatant lies, the reports of the somber details of the destruction brought upon by the Johnstown Flood would often be followed by a call “for the aid of the Johnstown sufferers.”<sup>24</sup> The headlines and stories that were printed succeeded in creating a nationwide desire to contribute to the relief of this terrible tragedy. Volunteer laborers were recruited, and donations of food, clothing, and money flooded in for the relief of the Johnstown Flood survivors. An entire page of *The Salt Lake Herald* was published as an ad with the headline “For Sweet Charity,” promoting the ticket sales of a “mammoth concert! In the aid of the sufferers of the Johnstown Flood.”<sup>25</sup>

Clara Barton and the “newly organized American Red Cross . . . her delegation of fifty doctors and nurses . . .” arrived at Johnstown five days after disaster struck.<sup>26</sup> The Red Cross got to work right away, immediately setting up camp with tents and cots.<sup>27</sup> In addition with being skilled in “perform[ing] hands-on nursing,” Clara Barton was also skilled in “manag[ing] all logistics of relief.”<sup>28</sup> The Red Cross had quickened the relief process as they “began by receiving and distributing the trainloads of supplies their headquarters back in Washington had already

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<sup>22</sup>McCullough, *Johnstown Flood*, 220.

<sup>23</sup>Alexandra Samuel, “To Fix Fake News, Look to Yellow Journalism,” Daily.JSTOR.org, accessed November 27, 2020, <https://daily.jstor.org/to-fix-fake-news-look-to-yellow-journalism/>.

<sup>24</sup>“In Unknown Graves,” *Jersey City (NJ) News*, June 4, 1889.

<sup>25</sup>“For Sweet Charity!” *Salt Lake (UT) Herald*, June 9, 1889.

<sup>26</sup>McCullough, *Johnstown Flood*, 229.

<sup>27</sup>In addition to volunteers with the Red Cross, “between 6,000 and 7,000 laborers would be on the scene.” (Roker, 212).

<sup>28</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 225.

begun raising and having sent in huge volumes.”<sup>29</sup> The Red Cross would be “put . . . on the map” by their work at Johnstown, as it was their first major peacetime disaster relief effort.<sup>30</sup> In addition to distributing “nearly half a million dollars’ worth of blankets, clothing, food, and cash,”<sup>31</sup> Clara Barton and the Red Cross began construction of “quick, temporary shelters,” an effort not yet practiced by the organization before their relief work at Johnstown.<sup>32</sup> Clara and the Red Cross offered shelter to thousands of survivors left homeless by the flood “at little or no cost to them.”<sup>33</sup>

Although many of those who traveled into Johnstown were there to help, the influx of people included those with malicious intent. Some of the crimes included “simple theft of stuff lying in the wreckage,” or “trophy-seeking”<sup>34</sup> in which people from outside of Johnstown would search for any interesting item they could carry home to boast as a relic from the dreadful disaster.<sup>35</sup> In addition to these less harmful crimes, there were men who came to town to prey on the vulnerability of already devastated survivors, “especially good-looking young women,” promising hope for a new life, “if the women would only come away with them.”<sup>36</sup>

Indirect victims of these loathsome thieves and con men were the immigrant citizens of Johnstown. Having already faced the horrors of the flood, immigrant survivors were targeted and blamed for the crimes that occurred after it. “Hungarian” was a blanket term for “any immigrant

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<sup>29</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 228.

<sup>30</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 226; Johnstown Flood Museum, Johnstown Area Heritage Association, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.jaha.org/attractions/johnstown-flood-museum/flood-history/facts-about-the-1889-flood/>.

<sup>31</sup>McCullough, *Johnstown Flood*, 231.

<sup>32</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 229.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 218.

<sup>35</sup>In his book, *Ruthless Tide*, Al Roker tells of a “souvenir hunter [that] saw a wooden leg . . . . As he and his friends dug and pulled at it, they found the leg was still attached to a dead body.” Roker later speculates whether this was a true occurrence or not. (Roker, 270).

<sup>36</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 218.

of Slavic descent.”<sup>37</sup> Newspapers would report of the “thugs and human vultures” who were “robbing even the dead bodies,” and had been met with their “deserved death while at their nefarious work.”<sup>38</sup> These reports specifically referred to the criminals as “Hungarians,” and mention the “farmers [who] armed themselves” to pursue the “brutes.”<sup>39</sup>

Often, it was “vigilante posses” that were taking surveillance of the area into their own hands, “kill[ing] recent immigrants who stuck them as suspicious.” Though these xenophobic ideals were present before the flood, the disaster brought it to the surface much like the “mud that lay below the former city.”<sup>40</sup> The truth was that it was people of all ethnicities that took part in the thievery, most of whom were not from Johnstown at all. To combat the crime problem and the responsive vigilante efforts, it was requested that the governor of Pennsylvania send troops to the scene. However, even the introduction of outside policing created problems as well. Taking advantage of the opportune environment of the presence of “more than one thousand varying, temporary, semi-official police,” there were people who would “put on stars they’d cut out of tin and appointed themselves police, too.”<sup>41</sup>

Even the overabundant amount of money donated towards relief efforts posed a problem. Much of the labor was volunteered, and many of the items distributed to survivors were donated directly. The Johnstown Flood Museum website reports that \$3,742,818.78 was collected for the relief of the Johnstown Flood disaster.<sup>42</sup> There had been an excess amount of nearly two million

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<sup>37</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 219.

<sup>38</sup>“Horrors Upon Horrors,” *Evening World* (New York, NY), June 3, 1889.

<sup>39</sup>“Horror of Horrors,” *Crawford Avalanche* (Grayling, MI), June 6, 1889.

<sup>40</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 219.

<sup>41</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 220.

<sup>42</sup>Johnstown Flood Museum, Johnstown Area Heritage Association, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://www.jaha.org/attractions/johnstown-flood-museum/flood-history/facts-about-the-1889-flood/>.

dollars after directing funds towards relief efforts. The uncertainty of how to distribute the remaining money “became another source of friction among the survivors.”<sup>43</sup>

Members of the South Fork Club had also contributed to the relief efforts, though with underlying motive. In a private meeting, it was agreed upon by members of the club to follow this tactic: “contribute as much as possible to the relief effort and . . . say as little as possible about the South Fork dam.”<sup>44</sup> The people of the United States, having followed stories of the disaster since its beginning, knew that the cause of the flood was the neglected dam containing the man-made lake enjoyed by the members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. Though the Cambria County coroner’s jury issued the verdict that the “owners of the dam . . . are responsible for the fearful loss of life and property,” the justice sought by people all over the country for the victims and sufferers of the Johnstown Flood would never be actualized.

Club members shifted blame to the weather, stating that “no dam on earth could have withstood the onslaught of this never-before-seen degree of flooding.”<sup>45</sup> When the topic of neglect was brought up, blame would be shifted to the original builder of the dam, the state of Pennsylvania. Though members of the club were some of the wealthiest industrialists in the United States, the club itself “had no significant assets.” Even if members enjoyed the dammed lake, the blame for its neglect and failure could not be placed on an individual who simply visited it during summer retreats. The members successfully made it clear that any suit brought against them “might be long and difficult—thus expensive—and in the end potentially futile.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 231.

<sup>44</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 206.

<sup>45</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 248.

<sup>46</sup>Roker, *Ruthless Tide*, 255.

For the survivors of the Johnstown Flood, with each advancement towards solving the problems they faced, different problems would concurrently emerge. Each action had a positive and negative attribute. However, with the great injustice of never reaching a verdict on the legal accountability of the breaking of the dam that brought forth the tragedies of the Johnstown Flood, there was a bittersweet conclusion. Though Johnstown Flood survivors would never receive the justice they so obviously deserved, the tragedies they faced would generate changes for the United States to enforce liability on what used to be untouchable industrialist millionaires. These changes would ensure that preventable tragedies would never conclude with the same end that this disaster had. Just as each step towards progress had its flaw, even the ultimate injustice had hopeful prospects.

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