



### *A Herald Exclusive*

## **It's Been Fifty Years: Remembering the Deadly Flood of 1955**

August 18 will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of one of the Delaware Valley's most destructive weather events ever: the Delaware River flood of 1955. Starting this week and ending with our August 18 issue, the Herald is recognizing this anniversary with an exclusive, five-part series about how this disaster happened and the lasting effects it had on our area.

The series is written by Herald columnist and freelance writer Mary Shafer. She has written a book about the event, *Devastation on the Delaware: Stories and Images of the Deadly Flood of 1955*. The book is due to be published on October 1, but can be pre-ordered now at the book's website, <http://www.55flood.com>.

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### **Devastation on the Delaware: Part III**

## **August 19, 1955 in the Delaware Valley – River on the Rampage**

by Mary Shafer

By early morning on August 19, 1955, islanders on Shawnee, at the Water Gap, had evacuated themselves in the dark of night. Two feeder streams had poured so much water into the Delaware River that it had forced the river to flow backwards.

This was a miracle for the islanders, who'd been trapped by a rushing current too fierce to navigate. The backup smoothed the water for about an hour, just long enough for them all to escape before it once again flowed downstream, soon covering the island.

Just to the south, a photographer caught the collapse of the last covered bridge over the Delaware, between Portland, Pennsylvania and Columbia, New Jersey. The bridge tender, who'd been there for more than fifty years, had just managed to evacuate his family from their home on the levee there before watching the bridge—and his job—wash away.

New Jersey summer colonies from Belvidere and Hutchinson to Carpentersville and Byram took massive hits from the rampaging river, some losing almost 95 percent of their dwellings. On the Pennsylvania side, vacationers in Sandt's Eddy and Martin's Creek evacuated, while residents of Raubsville watched two-story houses carried onto the middle of Rt. 611 and broken in half.

Easton-Phillipsburg railroad bridges and trestles were first used as escape routes out of the city by surprised residents who hadn't realized a real flood was on the way. Later in the day they were closed, along with the Northampton Street Free Bridge and the Bushkill Street (Hwy. 22) toll bridge. Water invaded streets, homes and businesses blocks away from the river.



Late that night, remains of the Portland-Columbia bridge slammed into the Free Bridge, tearing out its center span. Along with it went cables and wires carrying electricity and telephone signals to and from areas as far away as New York City.



To the south, Riegelsville was inundated on both sides of the river, with many residents standing on the bridge to watch the water come up. By the time many of them

realized it would top the riverbanks, it was too late to do much about it. They grabbed what they could and headed to Red Cross shelters, where some would still be a month later.

Kintnersville, Milford and Upper Black Eddy suffered massive flooding of fields and homes on the flats beneath the Nockamixon Palisades. UBE lost its Post Office, which many described as looking like it was being driven by someone. It lifted off its foundation, took a sharp turn and headed down River Road to join the rest of the debris in the river.



An unprecedented helicopter airlift coordinated by the Bucks County Civil Defense Director evacuated about 400 children and counselors from island camps in the Delaware near Erwinna.

Lumberville had already been ravaged by the Paunacussing Creek late the night before, as had Carversville further inland. Now it was getting a second hit from the river.



Point Pleasant's Post Office and its popular Gobblers night club were both underwater, with kids jumping off the roofs in the center of town to swim. Later that evening, the bridge to Byram would be torn out, never to be rebuilt.

New Hope and Lambertville were next.

*Next week: Awaiting the Crest*