



A Herald Exclusive

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

August 18 will mark the 50th 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>.

Devastation on the Delaware: Part IV

August 20, 1955 on the Delaware River – Awaiting the Crest

by Mary Shafer

It takes roughly 12 hours for a flood crest to move from the Water Gap downriver to Riegelsville, and another 10-12 to make it to New Hope-Lambertville and Washington Crossing and Yardley. New Hope and Lambertville were lucky to have more warning

time than other towns about the flood tide's arrival, but it wasn't enough time to remove everything important from the reach of the water.



On the way to the twin tourist towns, the Delaware River tore away the Point Pleasant-Byram Bridge, leaving it lying in a crumpled heap of twisted steel near the shore. When the water receded, it would look like a giant's abandoned plaything.

New Hope and Lambertville towns flooded to amazing depths, in some places more than five blocks from the river. Lambertville nearly lost its brand new sewage treatment facility, which had only been online for a few days before being overrun by the river.



Many residents weren't too worried, because they weren't yet on city sewer, since their outhouses were still very much a part of everyday life. The only problem was that many privies located near the riverbank were washed away in the current. It would be a boon for local contractors after the flood, who could hardly keep up with new orders for indoor plumbing.

The Lambertville Fire Department found the flood a perfect opportunity to prove the usefulness in second-floor rescues of its new ladder truck, which had been hard won in a funding debate.

In New Hope, the Bucks County Playhouse would lose several rows of seating, though the venue itself would survive. The Rexall Drugstore wouldn't be so lucky. Owner Benny Sedonis waited too long before beginning to move his stock out of harm's way, and ended up losing everything. The disaster ultimately drove him out of business.

Local officials and the Red Cross opened an emergency shelter in the high school, where people also brought their “evacuated” appliances for safekeeping until they could bring them back home. At one point, the gymnasium resembled a large auction.



The rising water, evacuation and subsequent street curfew caused a rare sight in the tourist towns: empty streets and sidewalks. The only thing more awesome than the destruction caused by the raging water was the speed at which the ravaged communities recovered.

Next week: Recovery and Legacy