


THE VOICE OF CENTRAL AND NORTH BUCKS COUNTY

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 V

After the Flood – Recovery and Legacy

by Mary Shafer

By August 20, 1955, the Delaware River had crested in New Hope and Lambertville, and was about to do the same in Washington Crossing and Yardley. Military helicopters were already out over the river and its more rambunctious tributaries,

such as the Neshaminy Creek, which tore through several Bucks County communities. It swirled up out of its banks in Doylestown, grabbing a nineteen-year-old woman and carrying her to her death.

The helicopters were in still in rescue mode on the southern stretches of the river, while they were being flown on countless sorties in the Poconos on body recovery and supply missions.



Around 8:30 in the morning, the river had risen to the deck of the Washington Crossing Bridge. A crowd had gathered to keep vigil in case the span succumbed to the terrible beating it was taking, as had the Point Pleasant-Byram bridge upstream. Many folks were also watching the Yardley-Wilburtha Bridge for the same reason.



While the Washington Crossing Bridge held, the Yardley Bridge finally gave way to massive pressure exerted on the debris that had piled up against it. It would later be temporarily restored with the wooden trusses of a “Bailey” bridge, but ultimately, it would be replaced with the Scudders Falls span, located in a less vulnerable spot downstream.



After the crest had passed, most of the water went down as quickly as it had come up. A few low-lying spots immediately along the river still held puddles deep enough to hide large fish that would occasionally leap up into the air.

Kids enjoyed the novelty of the situation, but were disappointed when school started on time. Adults had to face the disgusting job of clearing thick layers of the stinking mud from every possible surface. For some families and businesses, this would take weeks.

Tellers at the New Hope National Bank went to work in dungarees, hanging out stock certificates and money to dry, and ironing it all back to a useful state. Mennonites from the Blooming Glen area arrived to help stricken communities from the Poconos to Lower Bucks recover from the battering.

Flood control became the central issue of the day, along the whole length of the river. Some communities along tributaries and feeder streams did manage to plan, fund and execute limited flood control measures. But it was the massive dam project proposed by the Army Corps of Engineers for installation at Tocks Island that grabbed the spotlight.

For months, then years, the legal and social wrangling over the much-vaunted project went on. Through the civil strife of the 60s and the political turmoil of the 70s, the dam loomed large and ugly on the Delaware's horizon. But then federal coffers were drained in service of the Vietnam War, and support waned in Congress for the project.

By the mid-70s, the Tocks Dam had been shown by several studies to be of questionable value in flood control, as well as of dubious engineering quality. It became a

political football throughout the 80s, and was finally dealt a death blow by President Carter's 1992 designation of the Delaware as a Wild and Scenic River.

The land appropriated by right of eminent domain for the dam was turned into Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. It remains an oasis of wild and rustic beauty amid an increasingly developed area of the Poconos.

What lives on in the Delaware Valley of the flood of 1955 are changed zoning laws and traffic patterns...dried silt between wall studs and floorboards of buildings along the river...people who now speak knowledgeably about the interconnectedness of watersheds.

And—we may hope—perhaps just a bit more respect for the awesome power of nature at its wildest.

