DAY OF DISASTER

On June 6, 1903, the waters of the Pacolet brought death and destruction

The Pacolet River flows south from the Blue Ridge Mountains, becoming a slow-moving river that meanders through pleasant valleys in upperstate South Carolina. There it mixes mountain water with the red clay and heavy sediment of the Piedmont and takes on a brown coloration. It slides over rocky shoals here and there, but, generally, it is a river that rolls rather casually to its ultimate meeting with the Broad River.

On the morning of June 6, 1903, however, the Pacolet became a river of danger, destruction and death for some communities along its banks. Swollen by several days of rain and a concluding cloudburst, the river turned into an immediate and violent threat to all those living and working nearby.

The Clifton Manufacturing Company communities, situated along the river to take advantage of its water power, ironically suffered precisely because of that proximity. Clifton was directly in the path of the rising, raging waters. The result was the most devastating event in the community’s history. By the time the Pacolet returned to its normal temperament several days later, more than 50 lives had been lost in the river valley, and the property damage total was several million dollars.

Dozens of homes, stores and other buildings were washed away in the torrent. All three Clifton mills were heavily damaged. In the weeks after the disaster, the makeup of the community changed as many residents moved to other areas to find work and housing.

The first person to experience the power of the flood at Clifton apparently was W.H. Rhinehart, a night watchman at Clifton Mill No. 3, built along the river on the west bank at Converse. Several days of rain already had increased the river’s volume significantly, but a downpour upstream would have an even greater effect during the dark hours of that Saturday morning.

At 3 a.m., the river was about 10 feet out of its banks, and rising rapidly. According to newspaper reports, Rhinehart was standing in a corner of the mill at 4:30 a.m. when a large tree floated over the dam and plunged through the boiler room roof. The machine shop and boiler room were flooded within seconds, and the horror had begun.

The dam burst seconds later. The powerhouse was swept away, and a corner of the huge mill began to crumble.

Then, according to a report in the Spartanburg Herald several days after the flood, “Mr.
Rhinehart ran up the bank to get a safer and better view of the scene and upon turning saw the smokestack go down with a crash. In 10 seconds after this and about 10 or 12 minutes from the time the dam broke, the magnificently equipped 50,800 spindle mill was washed from its foundations, crumbled and the wreckage was carried down Pacolet river."
The collapse of the Converse dam left the rest of the valley in serious jeopardy. The force of the water had incredible power, and its destructive nature multiplied as it picked up debris on its way downriver.
The water destroyed houses on the riverbank near the Converse mill, ripped bridges away at No. 1 and slammed into the mill, causing heavy damage. Houses between River Street and the river were easy targets, falling into the current like tiny toys. The electric railway, or streetcar, tracks running from No. 1 to Converse along the riverbank were uprooted and twisted like pretzels.
The force of the water crumbled the riverside corner of the No. 2 mill, causing severe damage. Riverside homes at No. 2 also were carried away in the current, along with the post office and the two-story company store.
Jesse Thornton, now a resident of Cedar Street at Clifton No. 2, was two years old on June 6, 1903. His family—parents John Thomas "Jack" and Fannie Thornton and five children—lived in a house near the river at No. 2. Thornton remembers being told what happened in the Thornton home that morning.
"I woke Daddy up to get me some water," he said. "Daddy got up to get me some and saw that the flood water was already up on our porch. He got us all up and brought us out over on the hill. Then he went back and got a fellow who was tangled in chicken wire and brought him out. The house washed away not long after we got out. Everything along where our house was went down the river."
At the settlement of Santuck, below No. 2, many deaths occurred as the water struck houses near the river. On down the valley the water roared, slamming into three mills at Pacolet and causing heavy damage.
Machinery, timbers, bricks, iron rails and cotton—hundreds of bales of cotton—were picked up by the churning waters. The Clifton mills lost about 700 bales; others were saved because they were on higher ground. The bales became lifesavers for people who were able to reach them in the river and hold on until they were rescued.
Many people were saved by the efforts of heroes whose names may never be known. For many others, however, the waters were too swift, too deep, too deadly.
The Spartanburg Journal reported that spectators witnessed "the body of a woman cold in death, being carried down stream by the torrent. Near the woman and clinging to the wreckage was a little boy who called loudly for help as he passed before the eyes of the gazing but helpless crowds watching the flood. An attempt was made to reach the child, but no one was able to brave the fury of the waters and
Devastation describes the scene at No. 2 mill after the flood. The dummy line tracks lead into the damaged mill. At left is the debris from the destroyed company store. More remains rest against the mill at the end of the dummy line tracks.

the little fellow was carried down stream calling pitifully for help.”

The Spartanburg Herald reported that the greatest loss of life occurred at No. 2, where it estimated that 40 people were killed and 60 houses were destroyed. According to a Herald story on June 9, “James Elders, Bud Emory, Oliver Johnson and Lige Hall were caught on the roof of the cotton warehouse. They went down the river and a great concourse of people watched anxiously but could not aid. They finally went down with the exception of James Elders, who grabbed the limb of a tree and Lige Hall, who was found yesterday near Pacolet.”

The swift, swirling waters claimed 11 members of one family.

The life-and-death drama occurring on the river had its effects even on those who survived. “I tell you, mister, I will never forget till my dying day the cries of the people as they floated down the river,” one woman told the Herald. “I hear the cries now, I hear them as I go to sleep, and I am sure I will hear them as long as I live.”

Some amazing stories came from the experiences of those who cheated death. Perhaps the one repeated most often is that of Hickman Stribling, who was a clerk at the No. 2 company store along the river. Stribling slept on the second floor of the store and apparently was awakened by the raging water. With no other means of escape, he climbed to the roof of the building, then was dumped into the water when the building collapsed. Near the mill he grabbed a tree and managed to hold on, but he was trapped there in the current without any clothing.

A woman who was stranded in a tree nearby threw her apron to Stribling. He stayed in the tree most of the day, along with a large snake, and later was rescued when a baseball pitcher from Converse tied string to a ball and threw it to him. The string was tied to a rope, and Stribling finally was pulled to safety.

Another who survived the flood was an eight-year-old boy named G.M. Hill. Hill, who later would move from Clifton to Spartanburg and would serve in the South Carolina House of Representatives, lived with his parents, Thomas and Mary Hill, on River Street. In an interview 63 years after the flood, he remembered the terror of that morning.

“If it wasn't for a bean stick, I wouldn't be here today,” Hill said. He said the members of his family were awakened by someone running up the street and yelling for them to leave their houses. “My mother had my little brother and I grabbed the bean stick,” he said. “She told me to hold on until she could get to the bank. My first cousin, Miss Dolly Holland, pulled me out.
I was holding to that stick with all my strength. The water was so swift it knocked my feet from under me and I was just swinging there when I was snatched up. I sat on the bank and watched homes being washed away.

George Willis was 17 at the time of the flood and was interviewed by a Spartanburg Journal reporter on the subject in 1965.

"We stood on the river bank with the water up to our ankles as we watched several persons clinging to housetops that were floating down the muddy waters," Willis said. "It was a helpless feeling."

Willis said he and two other teen-agers removed rope from a well bucket to help a woman floating in the river between No. 1 and No. 2. "She had two sticks of cord wood under each arm to keep afloat and her head above the raging torrent," Willis said. "We threw the rope to her and she grabbed it. While pulling her toward the river bank, a small oak tree popped up in the water and she grabbed hold of the tree. We finally persuaded her to let go of the tree so we could pull her into the bank."

The Spartanburg Herald of June 9 reported another narrow escape at No. 1: "Mr. and Mrs. Coleman were caught in the second story (of the mill). The roof fell in and they managed to grab a rafter in the water. They floated down stream and then came back near enough for the people to climb into the second story window of Mr. Pettit's house. Here they awaited the rescuers who were devising means for relief. The water, meanwhile, was rising rapidly and was half way up the window in the second story. The house was tottering and it was evident that if anything was to be done it must be done quickly. T.S. Upton and others found a well rope and the Upton Colemans climbed out the window, the mother still clinging to her two babies. Stout hands and brave hearts pulled at the rope and the raft moved shoreward. An angry wave dashed it to one side almost upsetting it. There was an opening in the housetop and through this one of the little infants fell as the raft was about to capsize and just as it was going out of sight to certain death, one of the rescuers grabbed its..."
The flood waters removed a portion of this house. The family's organ (in front of the house) was rescued.

Workers begin cleanup in the weaving room at the No. 1 mill after the flood.

“The destruction in places
Tracks along the river show the power of the flood waters.

The flood caused heavy damage to the streetcar line between River Street and the river. The section of the line between No. 1 and Converse was not replaced.

is total, awful and complete.”
Flood waters begin receding in the Converse area. The railroad trestle was the only structure left across the river after the flood, according to area residents. Some of the houses along the riverbank were damaged and later were moved to No. 2 and restored. Note a convenience of the times in the field behind the homes: the outhouse.
Debris remains on the No. 2 dam the day after the flood.

clothes and the family were all finally saved.”

When the waters finally began to recede, the grim task of searching for the dead, clearing away the debris of a crumbled community and finding homes for the homeless began. The Spartanburg Journal reported some of the devastation on June 8, two days after the flood: “In some places the sites occupied by the houses are buried beneath great sand banks and only an occasional piece of plank projecting through the sand would indicate that a house stood there. The destruction in places is total, awful and complete. The force of the flood has so changed the banks of the river and the flat borders on which numerous houses stood, that it will not be possible in some cases to rebuild on the former sites.”

Some of the houses carried away by the flood waters suffered only minor damage. They were relocated on property close to the points where the river left them and were claimed by new families. Some houses affected by the flood at Converse were moved to Mitchell Line at Clifton No. 2.

The Journal called the scene at No. 1 “indescribable,” and then proceeded to describe it. “The upper end of the mill is gone and the section thus exposed shows the crooked and bent machinery, the broken timbers, the wreckage piled up to the second and third floors,” the paper reported. “Across the river that part of the mill village located within 150 feet of the banks of the river is gone. The long covered bridge and the gangway for the hands are swept away as also are a livery stable, a store and other structures.”

A reporter covering the aftermath of the flood for the Atlanta Constitution filed these words on Monday, June 8: “Sadness and sorrow have claimed the town of Clifton for their own. In every street that separates the whitewashed homes of the mill operatives, the angel of death in passing by has left behind some mark of bereavement. The suspense in regard to those reported missing is even greater, if possible, than the grief of those who mourn for the dead... Four more bodies were secured today, two of which were bruised and discolored beyond possibility of identification. The efforts of fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers to identify some of these must ever form one of the saddest chapters in this awful calamity that has befallen Spartanburg County. ...The shadows that hang above the little town of Clifton, Spartanburg County, South Carolina, are the deepest and darkest.”

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Spectators gather to watch cleanup near the No. 2 mill. Debris from the company store is at left center.
Manpower replaces steampower as workers haul debris on the dummy line tracks near the No. 2 mill area as cleanup operations begin. In the left foreground is a ledger book rescued from a mill building.
Travel to the area was difficult, as floodwaters also had ravaged parts of the rest of the county. J.C. Garlington, editor of the Spartanburg Herald, reported that “it is impossible to reach Clifton except by boat and travel from one mill to the other is difficult... On horseback we made the trip to Glendale and started to cross when the horses mired almost to the bridges in the quicksand. We had to resort to the boat and leaving the horses hitched on this side of the river, we made the journey afoot, a distance of about five miles to No. 3.”

The railroad trestle at Converse was the only structure left standing across the river from the Converse mill to No. 2, according to residents. People wanting to cross the river after the flood had to travel to the trestle, which was much lower than the current railroad structure across the river.

The dismal task of burying the dead began
The river tore this section from the mill at No. 1.
as soon as possible. Several of those who drowned at No. 2 were buried on Vinegar Hill overlooking the river. Their graves are unmarked and covered with undergrowth. Only one of the tombstones remains, and it has been removed from the gravesite. Its inscription: *Julius A. Biggerstaff, May 30, 1876 to June 6, 1903.*

Newspaper stories published in the days after the disaster differ on the number of deaths. Estimates range from 50 to 70. Most historians agree that the Clifton No. 2 area was the hardest hit.

Six days after the disaster, the Greenville Daily News ran what it called a complete list of the Clifton families whose homes and possessions were swept away by the flood waters. The list (and number of members in each family): C.H. McCall, 4; M.P. Henderson, 5; Mrs. M.M. Rogers, 5; J.F. Langston, 3; F.M. Langston, 3; B.F. Cannon, 5; G.W. Pettit, 7; Mrs. J.V. Clayton, 7; Robert Burgess, 2; J.P. Hanse, 2; Arthur Hughes, 3; H.J.D. Lewis, 8; R.B. Cannon, 4; Henry Coleman, 4; L.A. Tinley, 4; H.L. Tinsley, 2; J.B. Lee, 5; R.S. Upton, 13; T.S. Upton, 3; Mrs. Lou Green, 1; Frank E. Clayton, 2; Jasper Bookout, 4; Jack Thornton, 7; E.P. Seay, 3; B.B. McClarey, 4; J.P. Bradley, 5; J.M. Noblett, 4; O.L. Wilson, 4; R.R. Thornton, 5; Ina Mayton, 2; Roland Quinn, 4; Bud Holland, 3; J.W. McQuinns, 3; Tom McQuinns, 2; T.A. Portee, 5; J.D. Stone, 10; R.R. Rollins, 9; J.A. Hinson, 4; W.T. Ross, 5; Mary Hill, 9; Mack Henderson, 3; Jack Crocker, 3; Rome Jones, 4; Tilda Slanford, 4; Joe Crocker 2; A.L. Green, 6; Dr. Bates, 3; Miller McKinney, 13; L.P. Calvert, 5; C.H. Lavender, 7; J.G. Franklin, 9; M.J. Cash, 8; L.E. Wright, 5; Jane Williams, 3; M.E. Powell, 2; Jno. W. Crocker, 3; T.M. Massey, 3; J.T. Powell, 3; Sam Eleles, 5; Luly Osborne, 4; J.G. Belch, 4; J.J. Calvert, 3; John Calvert, 5; Henry Henley, 10; Jas. Elchers, 1; B.S. Johnson, 1; W.A. Camp, 7; B.H. Littlejohn, 3; John Stewart, 9; J.B. Finley, 4; Mrs. Bud Emory, 3; Hickman Stribling, 1; J.D. Guy, 2; C.E. Rollins, 3; G.C. Thornton, 3.

Some who survived sought work elsewhere in the days following the flood. The Greenville Daily News on June 14 reported that "people are leaving in groups of 10 and 12 families—some going to cotton mills in this state and others to mill towns in N.C., where help is needed. The greatest impediment (to the exodus at Clifton is that wagons cannot be secured to haul families and their belongings to the (train) station—Converse—and in some places wagon travel is impossible."

Representatives from other textile companies arrived in the Clifton area to recruit workers. Newspapers reported at least 17 companies seeking workers in Clifton and Pacolet, and a newspaper story two weeks after the flood estimated that 25 percent of the mill workers in Clifton and Pacolet had left the area and accepted jobs with other mills.

For those who stayed in the community, the days following the flood brought trying times. There was assistance, however. The federal government sent a "carload of rations" to the area, and a relief committee was formed to accept donations and provide food, clothing and shelter. The committee ultimately received more than $20,000 from individuals, churches and communities in the Carolinas and Georgia, including an Episcopal church in Vienna, Georgia, a Catholic church in Greenville, and citizen groups in Abbeville, Johnston, Anderson and Lenoir, North Carolina.

A relief committee spokesman reported six days after the flood that there were "no cases of destitution whatever and aid is being given in the form of clothing, food or money. Clifton is receiving the closest attention as the destruction of property there among the operatives (mill workers) was greater than at Pacolet."

The Free Lance, a Spartanburg newspaper, also reported the presence in Clifton of "Capt. Hayes' squad of convicts," who were transferred to the area to work on the roads.

The flood cut to the heart of the Clifton Manufacturing Company. Its showcase mill, the almost new Liondale Mill at Converse, was virtually destroyed. The company's other two mills were heavily damaged. Equipment was destroyed. Cleanup costs were staggering.

Six days after the flood, the company's board of directors met in the city of Spartanburg. The directors decided to authorize company president A.H. Twichell "to take immediate steps to rebuild mills Nos. 1 and 2 and put them in
Machinery sags the weakened floors in the No. 2 mill.
Twichell's report estimated that $300,000 would be needed to repair the No. 1 and 2 mills and to replace their damaged machinery.

T.C. Thompson and Bros. of Birmingham, Ala., began tearing down the damaged walls at No. 1 and No. 2 in late June. Also working at the scene was J.B. Garfunkel of Columbia. Garfunkel bought the scrap iron from the damaged mills and removed it. Included in his salvage effort was a 100,000-pound flywheel that had been broken into pieces by the flood waters at the Converse mill. Cleanup work at the No. 2 mill included the removal of about 3,000 cubic yards of debris.

On Oct. 27, the Thompson company, one of the nation's leading cotton mill contractors, was awarded a contract to rebuild the No. 3 mill, and work there began Nov. 1 after about 900 cubic yards of rock and debris had been removed from the site. The mill was rebuilt on a hill above the river, away from the destructive power future floods might produce.

On May 10, 1904, less than a year after the flood, the company's stockholders were notified that the new No. 3 mill was completed "and is one of the finest mill buildings in this section, being 345 feet long, 125 feet wide and four and one-half stories high." The stockholders' meeting also heard a report that the No. 1 and 2 mills had been "substantially rebuilt and other buildings which were completely washed away or partly destroyed have been rebuilt and are now in better condition and more conveniently arranged than before our late disaster."

The report estimated that repairs at No. 1 and 2 had cost $400,000. Mill No. 1 resumed operations in January 1904, and mill No. 2 was running at half-capacity in May. No. 3's operations began later that year.

Most of the rest of the country will remember 1903 as the year Orville Wright made the first airplane flight near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, or the year the United States decided to build the Panama Canal, or the year the first World Series was played. In Clifton, South Carolina, however, it always will be the year of The Flood.
A PLACE CALLED CLIFTON

A Pictorial History of Clifton, South Carolina

By Michael Hembree and David Moore