

IT CAN AND HAS HAPPENED IN
SOUTH CAROLINA

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DISASTROUS PACOLET FLOOD OF 1903 POINTS UP DANGER
ALWAYS PRESENT WHEN THERE'S MORE RAIN THAN AN AREA CAN DRAIN

The recent, appalling visitation of flood waters on Pennsylvania and New England has brought the entire subject of floods before the public mind as perhaps no other event of recent years. Some of this interest has taken the form of conjecture on the possibility of such a calamity happening right around home, and the possible effectiveness of modern communications, new dams, waterways and other means for limiting the loss of life and damage

HERE in South Carolina we can look to the great PACOLET DISASTER of 1903 as proof that such events can and have occurred hereabouts, and perhaps for the rather obvious conclusion that a flood is likely and probable whenever there is too much water for a specific area to handle.

In terms of damage to industrial property, and in loss of life, the PACOLET FLOOD stands near the top among South Carolina disasters. In Spartanburg county alone property damage to mills, railroads, bridges and farms was reckoned in excess of \$4,000,000. Widespread damage was also reported in many other counties, especially those along the Broad and Congaree rivers with the overflow from the stricken upstate area leaving in its wake at least \$1,000,000 damage to crops in Richland county. And those were days of "gold standard" dollars

Estimates of the dead ranged from 60-80, although an accurate estimate of the loss of life probably has never been or ever could have been made. The high waters brought with them a great amount of sand which, settling as the river receded, created big islands and deltas which drastically changed the topography of the Pacolet valley. From these newly formed masses of sand bodies were taken for many days afterwards

The State Magazine - 10/2/1955

Another difficulty in properly recording the number of dead was the fact that the day following the flood was an extremely hot one, speeding the decomposition of the bodies and making burial on the spot necessary in many cases

DISASTER enveloped the narrow valley suddenly, without warning on the gray dawn of June 6, 1908 There had been rains in the Clifton-Pacolet area that night, but none sufficient to cause worry. At 6 a.m. hundreds of the mill operatives were beginning to form lines to enter the mills for work when it was reported that the PACOLET river was rising rapidly. No special importance was attached to it by the men, but within a matter of minutes, so fast was the rise of the waters, these unsuspecting operatives were running for their lives. Some climbed the high hills alongside the river and others, with less time held on to makeshift rafts, or to tree limbs while those even less fortunate were swept away.

Within a short time from the first report, two mills at Clifton (Dexter and Clifton) were heavily damaged and a third (Converse) destroyed A score or more farm houses along the river were carried off and at PACOLET, the deluge swept away a church, a flat of buildings comprising the post office, market, barber shop and blacksmith shop, a cotton warehouse and in a sudden, awe-inspiring rise of about 10 feet, destroyed the building known as Number 1 and 2 mills and heavily damaged the No. 3 mill. Four warehouses with 800 bales of cotton were swept away at Glendale.

A correspondent of The State was on the scene and he wrote the following spine-tingling account of the tragedy from PACOLET: (From The State of June 7, 1903)

"At 6 o'clock this morning it was noticed that the water was rising rapidly in the PACOLET river, but no special importance was attached to it by the mill operatives, who began to form in line to enter the mills. At mills No. 1 and 2, the water pressure soon became dangerous, the boiler rooms were submerged, and the workmen were ordered back. A little later the fury of the raging river struck mill No. 1 sweeping the plant entirely away.

The State Magazine - 10/2/1955

"The strong current then swept against No 2, demolishing that mill and leaving only the cloth room standing. The big bridge over the PACOLET river, a steel structure, was then carried away by the furious water which had burst through the dams. The warehouse with nearly 4,000 bales of cotton and 4,000 bales of domestic cloth followed, all the cotton being carried down the stream

"At PACOLET mill No 3, one half the picker room and five stories on the left side of the main building were washed away. The main building, supported by a thick brick wall, is still standing, but is very shaky and may collapse at any time. The boiler room is gone, but the smokestack is yet standing. The dam at No. 3 is intact. All the machinery in this mill is ruined.

"At Glendale, four warehouses filled with cotton and cotton products were swept away along with the dam across Lawson's fork and the trestle of the city electric railway. The mill at Glendale was not materially damaged

"At converse the main building of the Clifton factory collapsed and the water rose till the second floor of the mill was four feet deep--40 or 50 feet above the ordinary water mark. The Converse mill is utterly demolished, nothing standing except the picker room building which is badly wrecked. The Clifton Mill No. 3 also lost its boiler room, machine shops, engine room and smokestack..

"The Whitney mills on Lawson's fork were damaged by the heavy rise of the water and some houses and a steel bridge at that point were swept away. At the Tucapaw mills water rose to the second floor of the building and considerably damaged the machinery

All down the Broad river a scene of awful destruction unfolded, as the swollen, angry river, carried with it tons of debris, trees and bodies of victims that were swept from the Pacolet valley. A graphic description of the condition of the rivers at Columbia is to be found in the paragraphs below which are scarcely less awesome than the account of conditions at Pacolet!' It too is from The State, June 8, 1903

"Ten thousand people went down to the Congarée yesterday to behold the

The State Magazine - 10/2/1955

it carried the wreckage of the terrible cloudburst.

"All Columbia was interested and felt truly a deep sorrow at the blow which had befallen the state. Men, women and children lined the canal banks and the bridge which is about half a mile in length from early morning until after sunset observing the effects of the mighty tragedy which the ominous waters and the floating debris suggested

"Carcasses of horses, cows, sheep and hogs were at intervals discovered in the swiftly moving waters. At daybreak four bales of cotton were seen by watches on the bridge. These were quickly followed by others. By 9 o'clock more than 100 bales passed. Boatman along the bridge and at the locks made every effort to capture some of these but the terrible swiftness of the waters prevented in most instances. Many barrels were seen between 9 o'clock and noon. Several were caught and taken ashore by boatmen at the government dam two miles below the bridge. All contained oil.

"From the observation of those who were on the alert from early morning until night, 75 sheep, 20 calves and cows, 7 horses and 15 hogs were seen floating down the river. Never for a moment was not something riding upon the billowy waters exciting interest from the thousands of spectators. Great trees, green timber 40 to 60 feet in length were hurled along at a terrific rate; bridges little and big formed a line in the channel at close intervals for hours; large timbers of the Pacolet mills were even on their way to the sea.

ESPECIALLY hard hit were the railroads, and for several days afterwards the only way from Columbia to the Piedmont areas was via the C. N. & L. line which was used by Seaboard Southern and C. N. & L. trains. As one reporter put it, "The condition of affairs in railroad circles was enough to gray in a single day the hair of men who have handled serious problems before."

WHAT CAUSED THE GREAT PACOLET FLOOD?

At first it was reported that the Toxaway dam in North Carolina had broken, releasing the waters of Sapphire lakes. This was later found to be inaccurate. Then as

The State Magazine - 10/2/1955

all over the upper counties with flooding and large property destruction along the Keowee and Seneca rivers in Pickens and Oconee, theorists decided that a cloudburst in the Clifton-Pacolet area, following closely behind the heavy rains of the previous days had temporarily put a too-heavy drainage burden on the narrow Pacolet valley.

Section Director Bauer of the Columbia weather bureau was interviewed several days after the flood, and after expressing the belief that the disaster was 'undoubtedly caused by a cloudburst' concluded: "A study of the map of Spartanburg and Cherokee counties indicates that the lower Pacolet river drains about two fifths of the former and about one third of the latter county, as well as a large part of Polk and Cleveland counties in North Carolina. The portlone of Spartanburg and Cherokee counties would comprise approximately 400 square miles and the North Carolina area probably 200 square miles or together 600 square miles. Now one inch of rain on one square mile is equal to 86,044 cubic yards of water: over the whole of the 600 miles it would amount to 51,626,400 cubic yards and this multiplied by the depth in inches, that actually fell, estimating that it was five inches and this estimate is within reason, the total would amount to enormous volume of 408,132,000 cubic yards of water that was hurled in the short space of three or four hours by rivulets that became creeks, by creeks that were swollen to rivers, and by rivers that resembled floods, into the narrow valley of Pacolet Is it a wonder that the waters rose, first slowly then faster and faster until they seemed a wall of rushing, foaming, angry and irresistible force, and that the mills, houses, bridges, trees and every thing else in its pathway were swept away like play things by the ruthless feet of a giant?

"Most of the rain that fell must have been in this off flow; there was no time for the earth to absorb any considerable amount, and too the previous rains had already saturated the ground. This condition prevails along the entire course of the floods in their way to the sea. The description of the conditions that prevailed at PACOLET serves as an example of the conditions that caused floods in the other Up-country rivers

The State Magazine - 10/2/1955

The heavy rainfall was not confined to the area named but extended over the whole of the western half of the state, hence all the rivers shared to some extent in the sudden rise. This makes the damage widespread, but outside of the mills and warehouses destroyed and the bridges carried away, confined largely to the farmers that have plantations in the bottom lands of the rivers. The individual losses are therefore small but the aggregate an appalling total.

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