

# The Flood of 1903

## TERROR ALONG THE PACOLET RIVER

*By William M. Branham*

At 5 a.m. on Saturday, June 6, 1903, Hicks Stribling, storekeeper at Clifton Mill No. 2, heard water gurgling below his second-story room in the company store. As water rose up to meet him, he scrambled to the roof and then to a nearby tree where he spent the next 11 hours. He was naked. As dawn rose and revealed his condition to a woman in a nearby tree, she offered her apron to restore his dignity.

Ben Johnson, a merchant of the settlement of Santuck, just below the No. 2 mill, drifted nine miles with his wife and two children, down the raging Pacolet River on the roof of his house, only to see his family disappear over the Pacolet Mills dam in a swirling eddy.

These are two of the harrowing stories of the "June Freshet of 1903" on the Pacolet River in upper Spartanburg County. When the waters subsided and the catastrophe was totaled up, there were more than \$300 million (today's dollars) in damages, 600 people left homeless, 4,000 without jobs, 70 homes swept away, and 65 people killed or missing, some of whose bodies were never found.

In 1903, the 10 miles of the Pacolet River valley between Converse (where present day U. S. 29 crosses the river east of Spartanburg) and the village of Pacolet Mills boasted a bustling community of 10,000 people. Seven major cotton spinning and weaving mills ranged from the giant 50,000-spindle Clifton No. 3 to smaller mills at Clifton, Glendale, and Pacolet. Five dams along the river supplied the necessary power to run cards, spinning frames, and looms to produce a variety of cotton goods upon which the economy of Spartanburg County depended heavily.

Life in those mills meant hard work and long hours. But in off times, the pleasant Pacolet River provided swimming, fishing, and Sunday picnics along its banks. The electric railway offered easy access to downtown Spartanburg and the shopping joys there. The Aug. W. Smith Co. advertised first-quality men's suits at \$15, the John A. Walker Co. offered a splendid shipment of ladies' shoes and oxfords at \$1.50 a pair.

And so it was that in busy, bustling Pacolet Valley in June 1903, the spring crops up the river toward Campobello and Fingerville had been planted and the rows of corn and cotton were well on their way. Early in June the welcome spring rains began. From its headwaters near Tryon, North Carolina, the Pacolet River meanders from a trickle, crossing the South Carolina line southeasterly to Landrum, growing larger through Clifton, Pacolet, and on to the Broad and to the sea.

The settlers along its banks were accustomed to rising waters, and most were fully prepared. Every year cattle were moved from bottomlands, machinery and tools put away. At the mills, no extra precautions were necessary as almost 20 years' experience brought knowledge of expected river behavior.

But late in the afternoon of June 5, the third day of heavy rains, the North Pacolet River began to swell on its way to Fingerville.

Around Landrum, the Pacolet took the waters from North Carolina and sped them on toward the sea. From Spivey's, Motlow, and Obed creeks, the runoff raised its level to 10 feet over the normal bed of the river. Waters rose to eight feet in the cotton mill at Fingerville, and the machinery was destroyed. Just below Fingerville where the North Pacolet and Pacolet join, the water was higher. Further down at Buck Creek, 15 feet above normal, William Harden's grist mill was demolished and its timbers added to the

*Pacolet Mills residents stand by as rising flood waters approach Mill #3.  
(Courtesy, Town of Pacolet)*



tons of debris smashing down the channel. Lawson's Fork Creek, as it rushed through Spartanburg carried with it the major Southern Railway trestle serving the city, dumping it in the river above Converse.

But the *coup de grace* was to come at about 3 a.m. in the Campobello area some 30 miles upstream. Natives called it a "water spout," but it was evidently a small tornado accompanied by a fierce cloudburst. There are no records of how much rain fell in an extremely short period, but it must have been horrendous. Sweeping everything in its path, a wall of water gained strength as it tumbled down the Pacolet Valley. Its first major obstruction was Clifton Mill No. 3



Flood damage in Clifton  
(Courtesy, Bill Lynch)

(now Converse) at the bottom of a gorge alongside the river just north of the Southern Railway trestle. Mrs. C. W. Linder describes the scene: "The five-story, 50,000-spindle mill trembled for a while, and then gave way. Like a huge matchbox, it was carried under the trestle and on down the river." The dam gave way at the same time, and the water rose some 40 feet in a matter of minutes. The current there was estimated at 40 miles per hour. Mrs. Linder's house and others followed the wreck of the mill downstream. Three-quarters of a mile further down, Clifton Mill No. 1 awaited the onslaught. Warning had been given but there was little time to prepare. The wall of water thundered down the valley sweeping away everything in its path. All of No. 1 village within a hundred feet of the former riverbank was destroyed. The torrent took away a third of the mill, inundating the lower floors.

The upper end of the mill was demolished, exposing crooked and bent machinery and broken timbers. Long dirty streamers of yarn goods hung from the second and third story windows, the ends still attached to the wrecked looms. Portions of the dam and the turbines were gone. Three persons who had taken refuge on top of the mill were lost when a portion of the building collapsed.

The flood's greatest toll was yet to come. At Clifton Mill No. 2, Hicks Stribling was scrambling to his tree. Most of the operatives had been warned and had, in the few short minutes that the water took to flow from No. 1 to No. 2, managed to flee to higher ground. But some veterans of the Pacolet just didn't seem to believe the calamity to come and stayed in their homes.

The fury struck No. 2. It took away half the four-story mill. Normally 100 feet wide at this point, the river had spread to more than 500 feet. Terrified men, women, and children took to the trees, climbing higher and higher as the waters rose. Keeping them company in the branches were snakes, raccoons, and all manner of wildlife.

Just below No. 2 lay the settlement of Santuck, about 16 crackerbox mill homes in a low-lying bend. Here is where the disaster took its greatest toll of life. John Merchant, a second hand in the card room at No. 2, saw his sister, her husband, and three children swept away. The brother-in-law managed to catch a limb and be rescued. One of his children, a boy, was seen at Pacolet, nine miles down the river, fruitlessly crying for help as he was forced over the dam in the eddy below and lost. Mr. and Mrs. J. B. Findley drifted some five miles down the river with the debris. Mrs. Findley was lost. The rescue efforts at Santuck and the Clifton Mills were heroic. George Willis, 17, a weave room attendant at No. 2, and a friend spotted a woman clutching sticks of cordwood as she struggled to escape drowning. They commandeered a well rope, threw it to her, brought her close enough to shore, and carried her packsaddle the hundred yards to higher ground. Hicks Stribling and his apron were finally rescued from the tree. Someone enlisted the help of a star Converse baseball pitcher who tied a string to a ball and threw it to the hapless refugee. A rope was carried over, and Stribling finally made it to safety and clothing about 4 p.m. on Saturday.

Makeshift rafts were made from some of the thousands of cotton bales that were dumped from the warehouse by the force of the water. By tying ropes to the rafts and floating them out to the stranded survivors, most were saved, but some who couldn't hang on for 11 hours were lost.

One black man had been offered a dollar for each person he rescued with his

cotton bale raft. When he reached 99, he said he'd try for 100. On this last try, his bale overturned and he was lost to the river.

The greatest loss of life was at Clifton No. 2 and Santuck, but the greatest destruction of property was yet to come. Nine miles down the river, Pacolet Mills No. 1, No. 2, and No. 3 awaited the flood. By this time evacuation along the danger zones was complete and it was daylight. Spectators lined the banks.

First to go was Pacolet Mill No. 1, a four-story, 30,000-spindle mill that went down with a crash about 9 a.m. The crowds watching on the bank turned their attention to the adjoining mill, No. 2, half-submerged in the muddy waters. After about an hour, it shuddered and went under with a deafening roar. Pacolet No. 3 partially survived.

As the spectators watched, the body of a woman "cold in death" was carried downstream. "The horrified crowd watched as a small boy, clinging to wreckage near the woman, called for help as he passed before the eyes of the gazing but helpless crowd. An attempt was made to reach the child, but no one was able to brave the fury of the waters, and the little fellow was carried downstream calling pitifully for help."

By late in the afternoon, the waters along the river subsided and the work of picking up the pieces began. There were more than 600 homeless, without food, clothing, money, or shelter. The regular supply routes along the Electric Railway were gone; Glendale was as far as it could go. There was no electricity. Most survivors were just too tired and dazed to do anything.

On Sunday the search for the dead began. Many bodies were never found, washed down the river or buried under tons of sand and wreckage. One woman was found only because her knee projected above the sand. As the clay silt dried out, flies attracted to the cracks betrayed the location of many dead below the surface. The victims totaled 65 with some families completely wiped out.

President Victor Montgomery of Pacolet Mills and his brothers, Walter and Ben, together with a crew of laborers, struggled to save cotton and undamaged goods from the partially destroyed

# SPARTANBURG JOURNAL.

SPARTANBURG, S. C., SATURDAY EVENING, JUNE 6, 1903

PRICE: \$5 A YEAR

time the structure seemed to be in sound condition. Today nothing remains where the trestle stood but two stone abutments, one in mid-stream and the other near the north side of the rushing torrent. Lawson's Fork, which is ordinarily a small stream about 50 feet wide, is today an angry torrent two hundred feet wide rushing madly down to augment the already swollen waters of Pacolet river. All day today hundreds of people from the city were going and coming to and from the scene of the catastrophe. The sight was one to inspire awe in the breast of all who beheld the scene. Far up the river the angry waters could be seen rushing madly down stream almost like a thing of life. At the bend in the river several hundred feet above the trestle the scene was grand.

**POWER HOUSE UNDER WATER.**  
The electric power and gas plant located beside the trickling waters of Chiquopin creek was flooded before 3 o'clock, the water being four and a half feet deep in the furnace room and completely submerging the fires under the boilers. This put the electric light dynamo out of business and left the city in darkness. It was not until about 10 o'clock that the machinery could be seen and no cars were operated until that hour. Manufacturing and other plants using electric power were necessarily left idle. The damage to the fire hoses and pumps was not great, but the retorts were much damaged. However, there is

**100 LIVES LOST?**  
Reported that Clifton No. 3 Was Wrecked This Morning.  
**AND MANY COTTAGES DESTROYED.**  
Communication Almost Impossible all Day.  
**WIRES ARE ALL DOWN.**  
It Was Cried Across the River to Persons in an Electric Car that No. 3 Was Gone and 100 Drowned.

It is reported this afternoon that Mill No. 3 at Clifton succumbed to the force of the flood this morning and that 100 lives were lost. The report came from parties who appeared on north side of Lawson's Fork, this morning where the railway trestle went down. The men shouted the news across the waters and although it was difficult to hear their voices above the roar of the water, the purport of what they said as heard on this side was to the above effect.  
Clifton No. 3, is a four story structure located above the high trestle of the Southern Railway about 200 feet distant. The mill is in a deep valley surrounded on both

when he looked back and saw the bridge going down. He turned on a full head of steam and so close was the call that the last cars were pulled up an incline from off the bridge as it started down.  
**DAMAGE AT ARKWRIGHT.**  
At the Arkwright Mills two stores and three bridges were washed away. The stores belonged to John Burk and B. O. Pennington. The water reached the warehouse of the mills but did little damage.  
**OTHER MILLS REPORTED LOST.**  
It was reported here that the mill at Lolo, a 5,000 spindle plant, had been completely washed away. This mill is owned by S. W. Scroggs principally and runs on yarns entirely. There was also a rumor to the effect that the Fairmoot Mills had been washed away.  
**THE DAMAGE AT INMAN.**  
News from Inman today states that the dam of the Inman Cotton Mills was washed away completely. The cotton mill, however, escaped injury. A grist mill belonging to Mr. Wingo was also washed away. The county bridge near Inman was carried away by the force of the water.  
**Wires All Down.**  
All wires, both telephone and telegraph, are down and it is impossible to get a message through in any direction. One or two wires were working this morning, but even these are gone and no communication can be had with any point. People outside of Spartanburg think the whole place is swept

**3 PACOLETS GONE**  
The Entire Manufacturing Plant Swept Away by the Waters.  
**DEAD BODIES FLOATED BY IN STREAM.**  
Presbyterian Church Among the Destroyed.  
**THOUSANDS IDLE THERE.**  
Magnificent Industry Which Has Been a Most Successful One Washed Down Turrent of Pacolet River.

The worst damage so far reported was at Pacolet Mills. The water there had been rising for several days but the heavy downpour last night caused to be emptied into the river and its tributaries great volumes of water which rushed madly down stream on their mission of destruction. The big three story mill, No. 1, at Pacolet went down about 9 o'clock this morning with an awful crash. Then the crowds of people about the spot and lining the high cliffs which overlooks the mills, turned their attention to the large four-story mill, No. 2, which stands adjoining No. 1, and which was even then half submerged in the angry waters. The crowd watched for an hour as the fate of

**CHOATZ'S SON WEDS.**  
Imposing Ceremony at Albany Joining Happy Hearts.  
ALBANY, N. Y., June 6.—Fashionable society people from New York, Washington and other cities thronged St. Peter's Church today at the wedding of Miss Cora Oliver, daughter of General and Mrs. Robert Shaw Oliver, and Joseph H. Choate, Jr., son of the American ambassador at the court of St. James. The bride wore heavy white tulle, edged all around with point lace, which was fastened to her hair with a diamond ornament. Her attendants included Miss Mabel Choate, a sister of the bridegroom; Miss Mary Bowditch and the Misses Elizabeth and Marion Oliver. Following the ceremony at the church, the bridal party and the guests including Ambassador Choate and Mrs. Choate, repaired to the home of the bride's parents, where an elaborate reception was held.  
The bride of today is the daughter of General Robert Shaw Oliver, one of Albany's richest and most influential men, widely traveled and a famous wit. She is widely known for her beauty and a devotee of outdoor athletics. It was on the golf links that she first met Mr. Choate. There the courtship was pursued until an engagement resulted.  
Mr. Choate was an honor man at Harvard, is a celebrated golfer and is a fine stalwart type of American manhood. He has been in service as third secretary of the American embassy in London and is on an indefinite leave. Mr. and Mrs. Choate will probably spend the summer in this country and later take up their residence in England.

**SOUTH CAROLINA NOTES:**

## Deaths in the Pacolet Flood

### Clifton No. 2

Julius Biggerstaff  
Augustus Calvert, his wife  
and two children, Felix and Lou  
Bud Emory  
Mrs. J.R. Finley  
Joel H. Hall, his wife, his mother,  
and Ella, Jimmie and Lola, his children,  
and five other children  
Mrs. Henderson  
Mrs. B.S. Johnson and her five children  
Oliver Johnson  
Roscoe Johnson  
The Louin family of eleven  
Mrs. Massey and four children  
Ed Robbs, Mrs. Robbs and two children  
Genoble Sims  
Novie D. Sims  
Landrum Waddell  
Martha Waddell  
Dock Williams  
Mrs. Jane Williams' baby

### Clifton No. 3

Mrs. Fleetia Gosa  
Mr. Grier  
Mrs. Henson  
Miss Maggie Kirby  
Mrs. William Kirby  
Garland Long and his wife  
Mrs. John Owens and child  
Roy Owens  
Samuel Swearingen and his bride  
William Wood

### Pacolet

Quay Worthy

-from *The History of Pacolet, Volume II*,  
by Willie Fleming

Mill No. 3. But there was little to be salvaged. Most of value was on its way to Columbia and the sea on the waters of the Broad River.

By Sunday the sightseers had begun to gather. Though the electric railway was out, the Spartanburg livery stables were completely rented out of the flashy carriages and buggies so popular. June Carr, a photographer from Gaffney, loaded his bulky 8 x 10 camera and the fragile glass plates and journeyed to Clifton to record the devastation. Curious onlookers, dressed in their Sunday best, roved through the destruction carrying off spindles and bits of cloth as souvenirs.

Reporters from as far away as Atlanta descended on the scene. One issued a dispatch that made the national news concerning the destitution and deprivation of the operatives at the mills in Clifton. And this is where the egg hit the fan: Though both Pacolet and Clifton Mills had made special efforts to pay off employees so they could purchase food and clothing, and a relief committee had been formed that ultimately collected more than \$15,000 from as far away as Atlanta, Charleston, and Philadelphia, a Judge Williams had reported on Tuesday the 10<sup>th</sup> that many of the operatives were without shelter or clothing, went to bed supperless, and had been without bread part of the time since the disaster. He returned, he said, and simply confirmed the report that many of the operatives were on the verge of starvation and without shelter. He reported that he personally canvassed his friends and the neighborhood and gathered what food he could find, and he and his friends did what they could. "Nothing has been done for these people and conditions are getting very bad. Why the committee in Spartanburg doesn't loosen up is more than I can understand. These people need food and money, and they are not being treated right at all. Something should be done and done at once or we are going to have a lot of starving people on our hands."

This report brought forth cries of outrage both from R. H. Chapman, chairman of the relief committee, and from the newspapers that were not noted for their criticism of mill owners. Chapman said he had visited at both Pacolet and Clifton and had talked with the relief committee there and if such conditions existed, he didn't know of them: a head-in-the-sand condition common to many mill owners of that time. Ultimately the relief committee reported that all the money needed had been obtained and asked that further contributions be withheld. South Carolina Governor Heyward donated \$50. Thus a grand total of \$15,000 was available for 600 homeless

and 4,000 unemployed residents of the valley.

No organized relief was provided for the hundreds of small farmers along the path of the flood who lost homes, stock, tools, and crops. Federal aid to the victims amounted to one carload of food and clothing.

The Post Office Department came into its share of trouble. A big flap arose about the mail service. As mail came by train, and bridges were out to the north, west, and east, nothing was moving. It was Tuesday afternoon, after much vocal citizen and newspaper complaining, that mail finally arrived from Augusta.

Among the other rumors prevalent at the time was that the large dam at Lake Toxaway had broken, causing the surge of water. This brought heated denial from the management of Toxaway Company who wished to let it be known that everything "they did was in a first class manner and their dam had not broken...only a small pond had gone over its banks."

By Thursday things seemed to have settled down. The Southern Railway had repaired most of the trestles coming into town. Ferries were operating in a number of places along the Pacolet. The task of burying the dead was underway. One funeral was conducted via a special car on the Electric Railway from Glendale to the cemetery in Spartanburg. Many of the dead were interred in ground on a hill above Clifton Mill No. 2.

Today along the Pacolet Valley in the path of the flood, it's relatively quiet and peaceful. None of the rebuilt mills are operating any longer. Santuck is brush and forest. No one rebuilt there. Most of the stones in the graveyard are tumbled over and covered by weeds. Clifton village is a cluster of duplex mill homes, now converted to single-family use, populated with retired mill workers and a sprinkling of younger families. Modern Spartanburg is creeping steadily closer. Only a mile from Clifton is Broome High School, and \$100,000 homes are being built nearby. But like Ole Man River, the Pacolet goes on. At night or on a quiet Sunday morning, the only noise is the rush of the water over the abandoned dams.

*-Reprinted from Sandlapper magazine.*



*A crew digs through the rubble of one of the Clifton mills (Courtesy, Converse College)*

## Vesta Mills

### AN EXPERIMENT WITH BLACK LABOR

*By Allen Stokes*

By the end of the nineteenth century, the concentration of mills in such manufacturing centers as Spartanburg and Greenville placed a heavy strain upon the supply of local cotton and labor and prompted owners to look to other areas for the location of factories. The partnership of John H. Montgomery and Seth Milliken ventured far afield in 1899 with a controversial purchase of a mill in Charleston staffed primarily by African Americans. Their experiment with black labor sent shock waves through the mills of the Upstate and eventually caused a period of cooler relations between the two partners.

The purchase of Charleston Cotton Mills by Montgomery and Milliken came as the National Union of Textile Workers had launched an organizational campaign in South Carolina in 1898. The campaign experienced limited success in the Upstate, but viable locals were organized in the Horse Creek Valley region of Aiken County and in Columbia. The Charleston mill purchase

# TEXTILE TOWN

*Spartanburg County, South Carolina*

by the Hub City Writers Project

Betsy Wakefield Teter, editor



2002

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First printing, November 2002

Photo editors—Mark Olencki and Betsy Wakefield Teter

Front cover photographs—Spartan Mills spinner • Day nursery lunch kids in Pacolet Mills • Rising flood waters at Pacolet Mills #3 • 1930s Valley Falls Mill • Clarence Wilburn • Clifton weavers

Back cover photographs—Converse Mill, rebuilt after the 1903 flood • 1899 Lowell brochure • Crafted With Pride patch • 1931 Drayton Mills spinning room workers • Mayfair Mills spinning room • 1940s view down Liberty Street through Beaumont Mills, courtesy, George Mullinax • Mayfair Mills forklift operator.

Title page photographs—Clifton Mills #1 (*top left*) and Converse Mill, before the 1903 flood (*bottom left*), courtesy, Mr. & Mrs. Justin Converse • Clifton weavers (*right*), courtesy, Converse College

Scanning and photography—Christina Smith, Karen Waldrep, Katherine Wakefield, and Mark Olencki

Family support—Diana, Weston, Dave, Percysox, Sweetey, Sammy, and all the singing hamsters

Printed by McNaughton & Gunn, Inc., Michigan

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

*Textile Town : Spartanburg County, South Carolina* / edited by Betsy Wakefield Teter.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-891885-28-6 (softback : alk. paper) — ISBN 1-891885-29-4 (hardback : alk. paper)

1. Textile industry—South Carolina—Spartanburg County—History. 2. Spartanburg County (S.C.)—History. I. Teter, Betsy Wakefield.

HD9857.S6 T38 2002

338.47677'00975729—dc21

2002010860

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