

MILL RIVER FLOOD 150 YEAR COMMEMORATION MAY 16, 1874

The sudden collapse of the Williamsburg dam in western Massachusetts let loose a flood that swept away parts of Williamsburg, Skinnerville, Haydenville, and Leeds. It killed 139 people, all within an hour.

CEMETERY ENTRANCE



VILLAGE HILL CEMETERY, WILLIAMSBURG



Williamsburg Village suffered 57 fatalities—20 male and 37 female.

Of those, 19 were infants or children under 10. Early on a Saturday morning, women, children, and older folks at home did not hear the warnings that were carried directly to factories on the Mill River.

Eleven gravestones, mostly to the cemetery's south side, mark the burial places of 13 victims of the flood disaster — men, women, and children from

Williamsburg village and Skinnerville, aged from 3 to 80 years old.

Gravestones rarely give a cause of death, but several here bear inscriptions:

“Drowned in Mill River flood,” “Drowned by the Breaking of the Reservoir,” or “His Death caused by the Mill River disaster.”

D. Collins Graves and Jerome E. Hillman, 2 of 4 men who were awarded medals for saving lives by riding to spread word of the flood, are also buried in this cemetery, as is Hillman's wife, Sarah, who died in the disaster.

Blue flags mark the graves of those who died in the flood or who were celebrated heroes.

Ruins of the Williamsburg Dam
Williamsburg Woodland Trails

MILL RIVER FLOOD
STORY MAP



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HIGH STREET CEMETERY, HAYDENVILLE



Nine grave markers bearing the date May 16, 1874 commemorate 13 flood victims from Leeds, Haydenville, Skinnerville, and Williamsburg village who were buried here. Five of them were small children, 3 of whom have small stones to mark their graves.

Some individuals are named on memorials marking family graves: Eveline Sherwood, who died in Leeds aged 18 is named on the Davis family's monument near the cemetery's south end; 46-year-old Christina Hills from Skinnerville was buried in the Jacob Hills family plot near the middle of the cemetery. There she was just yards from her father, the German-born shoemaker John Kaplinger, who at 73 was the oldest victim of the flood in Haydenville.

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PARK STREET CEMETERY, FLORENCE



Though the flood destroyed bridges and damaged buildings along the river, it killed no one in Florence village. But Caroline “Carrie” Bonney, a worker at George P. Warner’s Mill River Button Co., was one of the many people killed in Leeds, and was buried here alongside her father, who had died when she was a small child. Carrie’s widowed mother lived for another 47 years and would eventually join them.

Carrie Bonney, whose gravestone gives her age as 18, but who was actually only 16, features in Nancy Meagher’s book for children, *Millicent and the Day it Rained Buttons*.

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BRIDGE STREET CEMETERY, NORTHAMPTON



Ten people killed by the flood in Williamsburg or Leeds were buried here and are commemorated on 4 grave markers. One, John Atkinson, was a Yorkshire-born textile worker in Williamsburg whose body became the formal subject of the coroner's inquest into the disaster.

Henry Birmingham, the English-born superintendent of the woolen mill in Williamsburg, died along with his wife Laura, and daughters Mary, Lillie, and Carrie. They were among many residents of the village's Mill Street and South Main Street whose houses were destroyed. An obelisk shaded by trees near the middle of the cemetery marks the Birmingham family's graves. Annie, Grace, and Jane Cogan, who were among 17 people who died when their homes at the lower end of Leeds village were swept away, are memorialized on a monument to the Princely family near the town tomb at the Bridge Street end of the cemetery.

Also buried in this cemetery is Myron Day, who was 1 of 4 men awarded medals for heroism in the disaster. With the flood close behind him, and knowing he would be unable to escape if it overtook him, Day drove through the narrow gorge from Haydenville to Leeds to bring warning. He had been on his way to visit his sister, Laura Birmingham.

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ST. MARY'S CEMETERY, NORTHAMPTON



Of the flood's victims just over half were Irish- or Canadian-born, or their American-born children. St. Mary's, Northampton's main Catholic cemetery, received the largest number of dead, burying at least 29 men, women, and children who had been killed in Williamsburg, Haydenville, and Leeds. Missing stones and incomplete records may conceal the burial of others, but 7 surviving grave markers commemorate 25 individuals, including 7 members of the

Fennessey family and 6 Fitzgeralds, all of whom died when the flood destroyed their homes on the river flats below Leeds.

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