

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.

HAYDENVILLE
MARKER

1

HAYDENVILLE BEFORE THE FLOOD

By early morning on Saturday, May 16, Haydenville’s factories were filled with workers. There were 300 men at the brass works, 75 at the tobacco mill, and 125 men and women at the cotton mill. Along Main Street and South Main Street, the shops were open. In the homes lining the river, children and their mothers were getting ready for the day.

Haydenville before the flood. *Historic Northampton*

 You are here at the church. (A) Mill River. (B) South Main Street.



MILL RIVER FLOOD
STORY MAP



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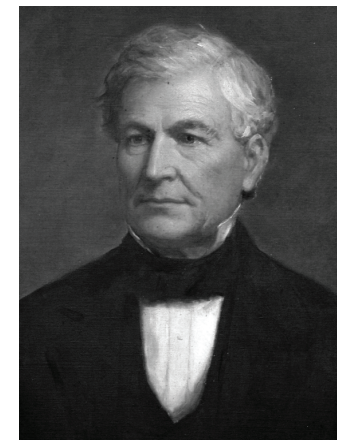
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HAYDENVILLE CHURCH BECAME A MORGUE LATER THAT DAY

On the morning of the flood, the Haydenville Church was decorated with flowers and black banners for the memorial service of town father Joel Hayden, who had died the previous November. Instead of a service, flood victims were laid out in the vestry. Hayden had been on the



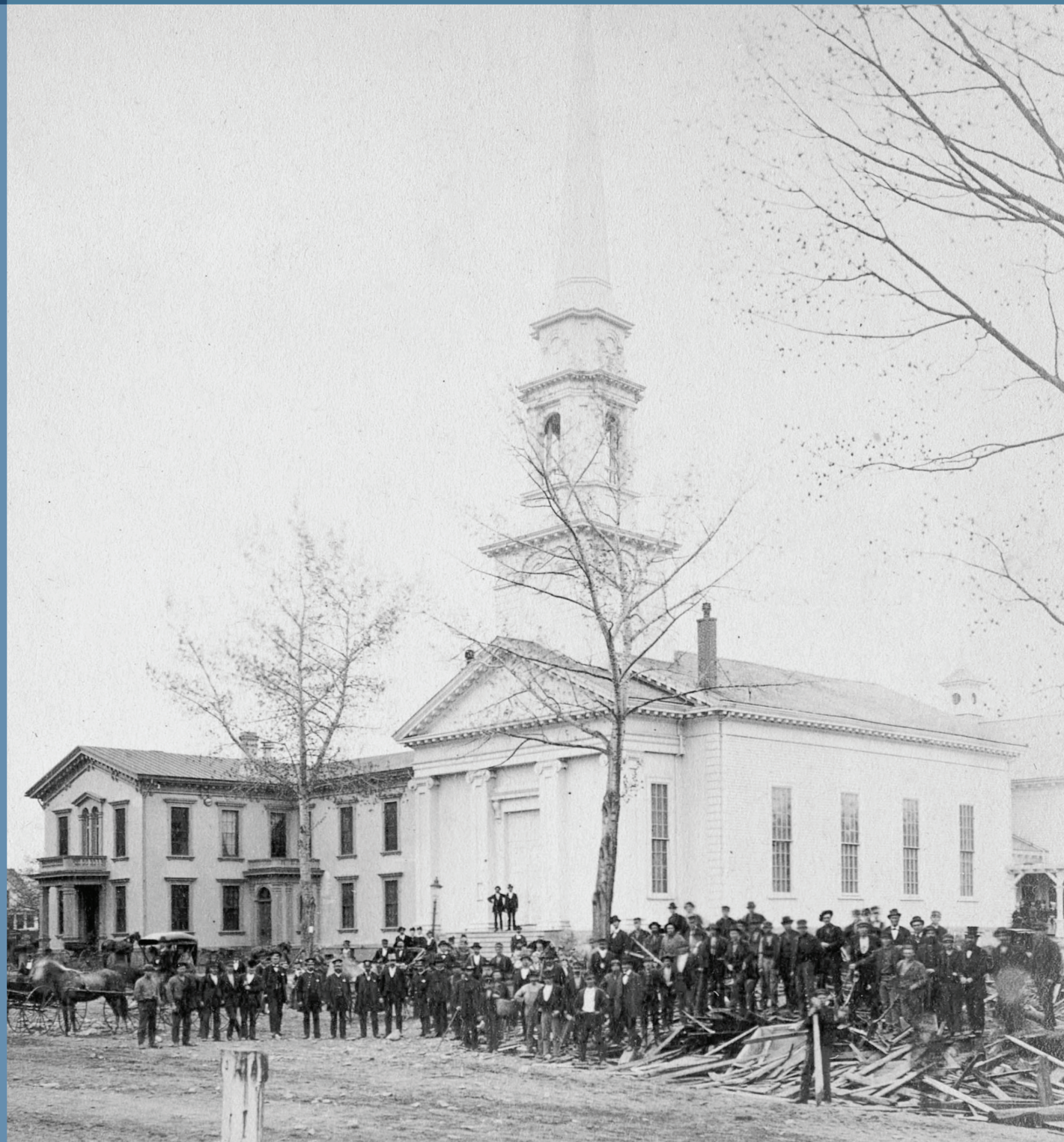
dam's building committee. He was the owner of the brass works and cotton mill, and he had been lieutenant governor of Massachusetts during the Civil War.

Haydenville Congregational Church. After the flood, thousands of volunteers came to the Valley to help find bodies and clean up. Gawkers and a few looters came too.

Joel Hayden (1798-1873)
Williamsburg Historical Society

*Walk north on Route 9 and turn left
on South Main Street in front of the
Haydenville Library.*

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GRAVES WARNS THE BRASS WORKS

Collins Graves, who had raced downriver from Williamsburg (on Route 9) ahead of the flood, wheeled his milk wagon into the yard and dashed into the office. He had learned that the dam was breaking from George Cheney in Williamsburg. Superintendent Samuel Wentworth ridiculed Graves, saying “It won’t be down here for 4 days, and when it does come, the water won’t come to our first floor.” Feeling foolish because he hadn’t seen the flood himself, Graves headed back upstream toward home. Within a minute, he saw Jerome Hillman on horseback, waving and shouting “Go back! A flood is coming!” Graves turned back to Haydenville and warned the village.

Brass works office building before the flood.

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JIMMY RYAN WARNS THE BRASS WORKS

Jimmy Ryan, age 12, lived with his family next to the river just north of Skinnerville. That morning, he was on his way to Williamsburg village for groceries when he heard about the coming flood. When he arrived home, his mother told him to drive to the brass works to get his father and brother. Jimmy warned the brass works as he summoned his father and brother who hopped into the wagon. They drove up to the railroad tracks (behind the row of houses on the east side of Route 9), saving themselves.

You are here on map.



FLOOD'S PATH RIVER'S NATURAL COURSE
County Atlas of Hampshire, Massachusetts (1873)



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BRASS FACTORY IS FIRST HIT IN HAYDENVILLE

A little before 8 a.m., the flood hit Haydenville and the brass works with a deafening roar. The brass works melted away instantly when a house from Skinnerville slammed into it. All that was left was the center section of the brick upper shop and a smokestack from the boiler. Minutes earlier, the factory had been 600 feet long. All workers survived except 1 who was safely outside but went back for his boots.

The brass works building here now was built in 1875 after the flood.
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MARY THAYER TRIES TO SAVE HER CHILDREN

In a small house on the opposite (west) side of the river, on Walpole Road, Mary and Edwin Thayer rented a house with their 4 small children. When Mary saw the flood coming, she grabbed 2 children in her arms and called upstairs to her other 2 boys George, age 5, and Freddie, age 1, but they stood motionless on the landing, frightened by their mother's hysterical cries. Mary escaped out the back door with the 2 children in her arms. As she tried to go back for the others, her house was swept into the current. Her little boys, who had remained on the landing, died. She survived.

The Thayers lived near these houses at the north end of Haydenville.

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At the library, cross the bridge over the Mill River and turn left onto South Main Street.



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MOST OF SOUTH MAIN STREET IS SWEEPED AWAY

From this point all the way downstream on Main Street and South Main Street, nearly every building (50 in all) next to the river was destroyed. They included: the Sharpe and Ames tin shop and stove store (on this site), Elam Graves's grocery, Chauncey Rice's boot and shoe shop, Pierce Larkin's grocery, Robert Cartier's blacksmith shop, and Myron Ballou's shop.

Ruins of Hayden Company buildings used in manufacturing. *Historic Northampton*

You are here on map.

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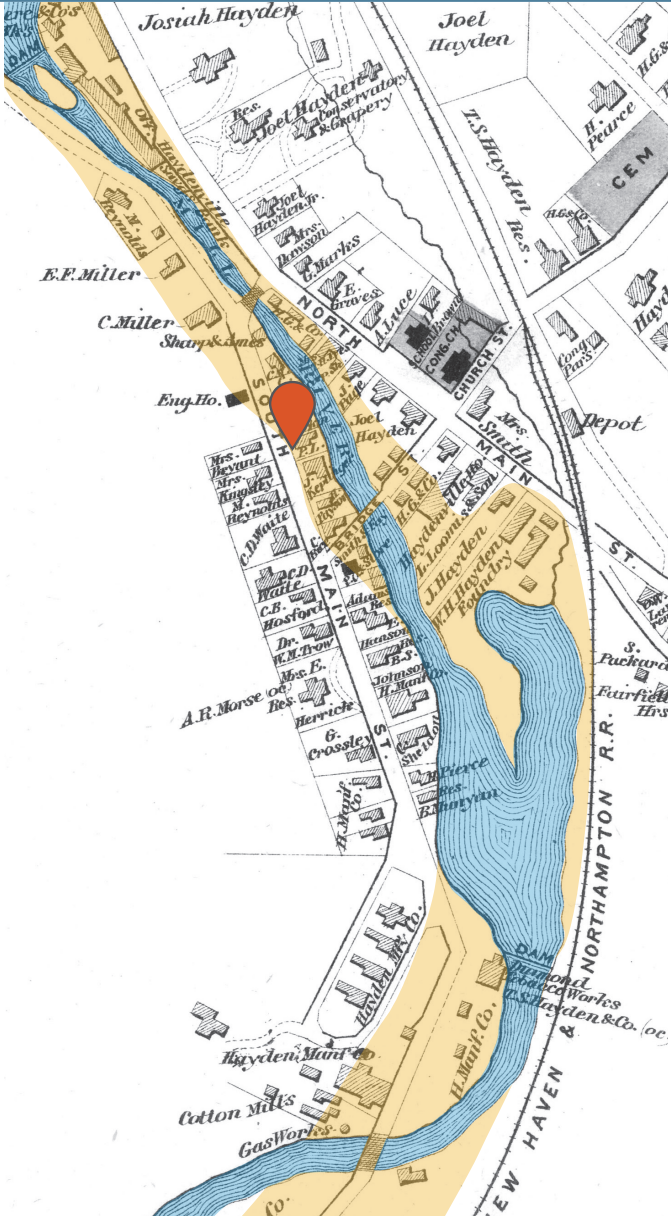


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● FLOOD'S PATH ● RIVER'S NATURAL COURSE
County Atlas of Hampshire, Massachusetts (1873)
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FATE OF THE MOCKLER FAMILY

Edmond Mockler was standing in front of his house (somewhere on this side of the street) when he saw the flood. He tried to go inside for his wife and disabled son, but he was carried away. Meanwhile, Mrs. Mockler had picked up her son, who could not walk, and escaped the house. For more than 10 minutes she stood waist-deep in water, taking blows from floating timbers. She was knocked down twice but never let go of her son until they were rescued after the water subsided.

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EYE WITNESS ACCOUNT

A reporter who interviewed Jerome Hillman, who had warned Haydenville, described what Hillman saw:

“Once he looked behind [him], the air seemed to be full of flying timber. Great trees were turning end for end; now their enormous roots were in the air, and then he would see their trunks and branches whirling round. At the top of a perpendicular wall of water, advancing down the valley, 30 feet high, were seen houses and barns turning over.”

Boardinghouses in Haydenville.

Historic Northampton

Walk back to the Haydenville Congregational Church by turning left at Bridge Street.



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CLEAN UP AND REBUILDING

On Sunday morning, May 17, only 24 hours after the flood, Joel Hayden Jr., owner of the brass works since his father's death, posted this:

Notice – Having decided to rebuild our works at once, we hereby give notice that we wish to employ a large force of workmen to clear away the debris, etc. Preference will be given to those previously in our employ . . . All wages due our workmen will be paid just as soon as we can make up our accounts . . . We would ask as a favor that all Materials, Books, Papers, etc., that may be found by any person belonging to us be returned.

Workmen digging for brass goods that washed downriver.
Forbes Library



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COLLINS GRAVES'S RIDE ENDS HERE

Collins Graves wheeled up Church Street to high ground and made his way down the railroad tracks (directly behind the church) as he watched the flood destroy 50 buildings in the village. He would have seen these boarding houses go down. His milk cans had rattled from his wagon,

and his horse was so lame from the breakneck run that he had to have her shot within the year. He had saved perhaps 500 lives.



Collins Graves

View up Main Street with the ruins of the brass works in the distance.

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SHOUT OF “FIRE!” SAVES TOBACCO MILL WORKERS

Myron Day lived in Leeds and heard the alarm as he was driving into Haydenville. He turned around to race back to Leeds. As he passed the tobacco mill (located where the house in front of you sits next to the river), he shouted “Fire!” because he thought it would get more attention than “Water!” It did, and all escaped. The mill was demolished.

Day raced his horse “at a dead run,” and risked their lives to make it to Leeds through the gorge ahead of the flood. He just made it.

South end of Haydenville before the flood.

(A) is the tobacco mill. (B) is the cotton factory, located where the house across the street is sited.

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COTTON MILL WAS NOT DAMAGED

The Hayden cotton mill stood on higher ground a few hundred feet back from the river (where the house across the street is now). It was untouched by the flood. Six cotton mill houses within the curve of the oxbow were destroyed. In 1 of them, the Miller children (ages 10, 8, and 1) were killed. Their mother worked at the cotton mill. Their father was at the barber shop near the brass works and couldn't get home to save them.

(A) Site of tobacco mill. (B) Cotton mill. *Forbes Library*

Travel ahead one mile down River Road. Turn left on Mulberry Street and make a quick left into the Chartpak Co. parking lot. Park at the southeast corner. Leeds Markers 1, 2, 3 and 4 are on Mulberry Street.

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