

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.

LEEDS
MARKER

1




Leeds Civic Association

MYRON DAY RISKS HIS LIFE TO WARN LEEDS

About 7:30 that morning, Myron Day left his Leeds home to drive to Williamsburg to visit his sister. When he reached Haydenville, a fleeing brass worker told him the flood was coming. Day looked up the valley and saw the flood wave. He knew he had to warn Leeds. Day turned his wagon around and raced through the gorge ahead of the flood, knowing that he and his horse would drown if the flood overtook them there. When he arrived here, he had only minutes to warn the village. He would find out later that his sister and her entire family in Williamsburg were dead.

Leeds before the flood.

(A) The Nonotuck silk mill. (B) The silk mill boardinghouse.

 You are here.

Turn left onto the sidewalk and walk toward the bridge.

MILL RIVER FLOOD
STORY MAP

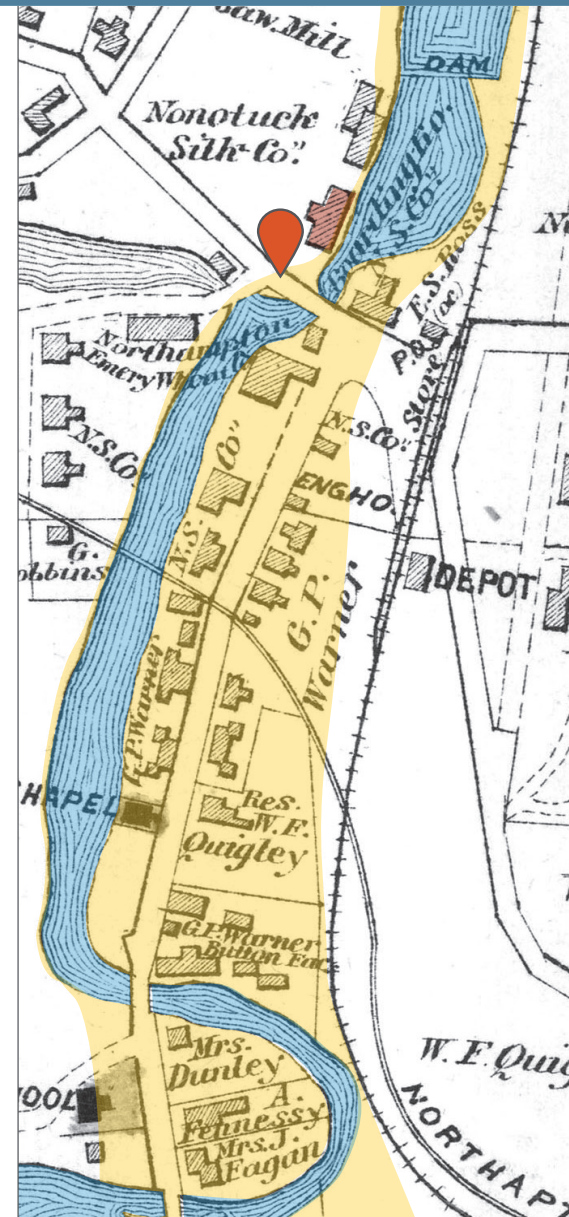
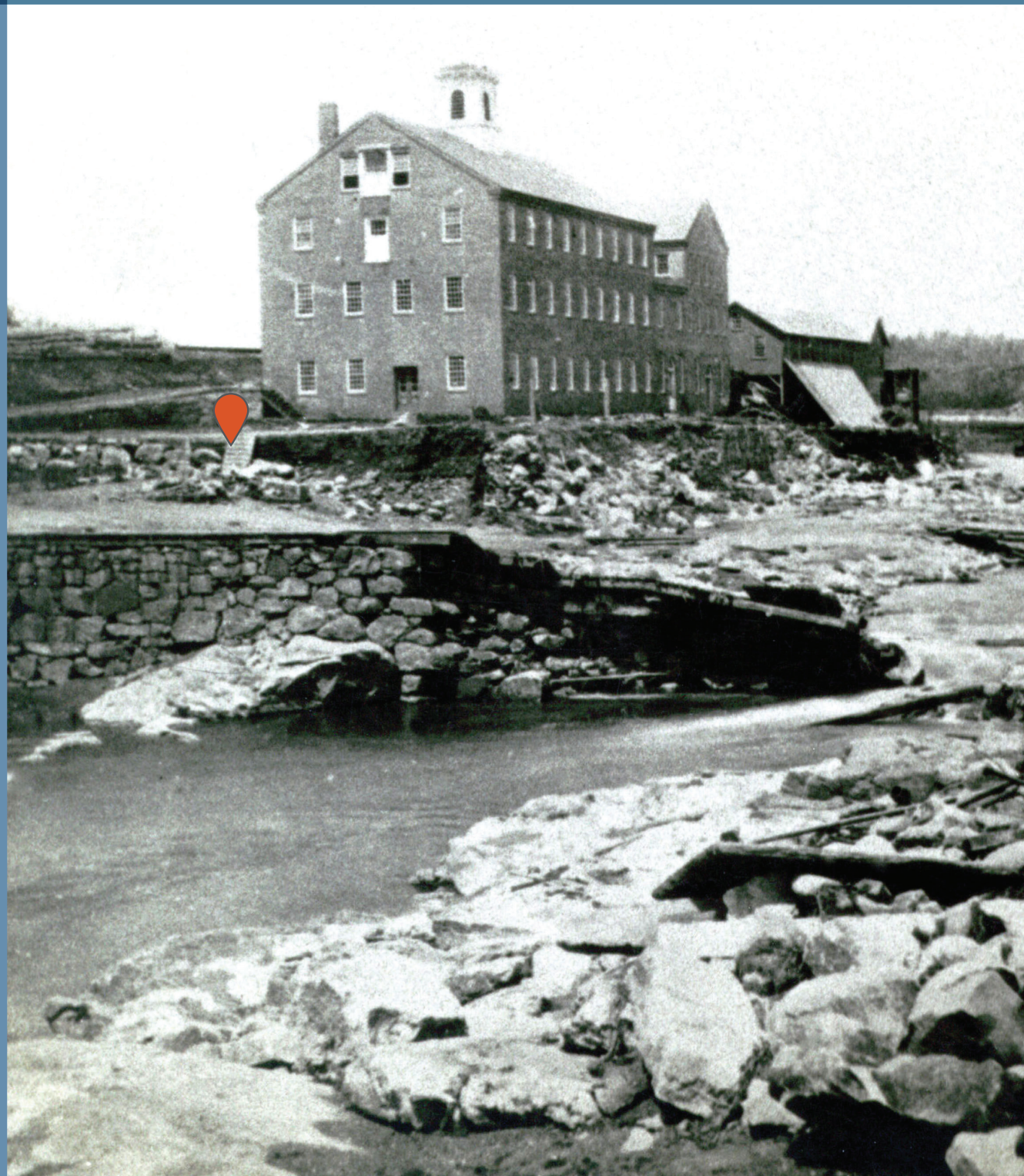


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● FLOOD'S PATH ● RIVER'S NATURAL COURSE
County Atlas of Hampshire, Massachusetts (1873)

MYRON DAY WARNS THE SILK MILL, SHORTLY BEFORE 8:00

Myron Day drove straight to the Nonotuck silk mill, which was located on this spot, to warn the 200 workers. All 3 floors emptied quickly. The flood struck the silk mill a few minutes after 8 a.m. It crushed part of the dam and then tore off the waterpower equipment. It carried away a storehouse, piles of raw silk, and the board fence. Some workers who did not immediately flee to high ground perished.

Silk mill after the flood. The Mulberry Street bridge has been washed away. *Historic Northampton*

📍 You are here on map.

MILL RIVER FLOOD
STORY MAP

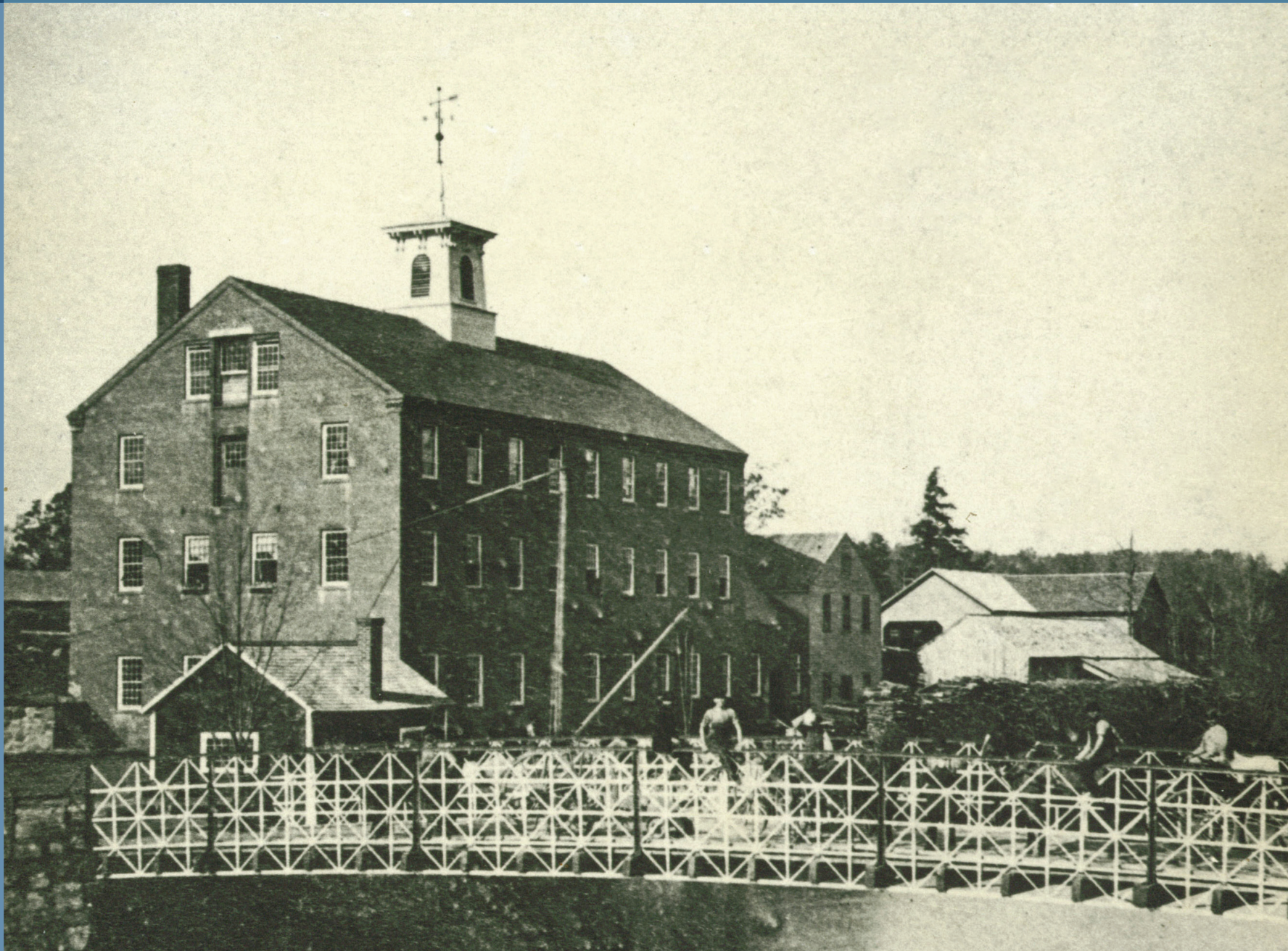


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THE FATE OF WORKERS ON THE BRIDGE

Mary Harding and Mary Woodward, who worked at the silk mill, started to cross this bridge to their boardinghouse, followed by several co-workers. When the rising water shook the bridge, all made it across to safety, except one who did not get off the bridge in time and drowned.

Photo before the flood, circa 1860. This is the bridge Mary Harding and Mary Woodward ran across to safety.

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



DEATH AT THE BOARDINGHOUSE

Mary Harding and Mary Woodward ran off the bridge (A) into the boarding house (B) just as manager T. F. Vaughan was evacuating everyone. Mary Harding and Vaughan ran out. But Mary Woodward stayed inside. No sooner had Vaughan gone back inside for her than water poured through the second-floor windows. It floated the building hundreds of feet across the road until it smashed into the fire house. Vaughan and Mary Woodward died.

Nonotuck silk mill boardinghouse before the flood.
Leeds Civic Association



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THE FLOOD DEVASTATED LEEDS AND KILLED 51

From this point south, the flood spread out to cover the entire width of the village so that nothing and no one could escape its grasp. It left only 3 houses on Main Street standing on their original sites, and killed 51 people.

 You are here on map.

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

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THREE-BUILDING PILE-UP

The fire house stood here. The flood pushed the silk company boardinghouse and a wooden silk mill office building onto the firehouse (engine house), creating a 3-building pile-up that was covered by the boardinghouse roof. Inside, Mary Woodward, age 20, and T. F. Vaughan, the manager, age 40, died.

Historic Northampton

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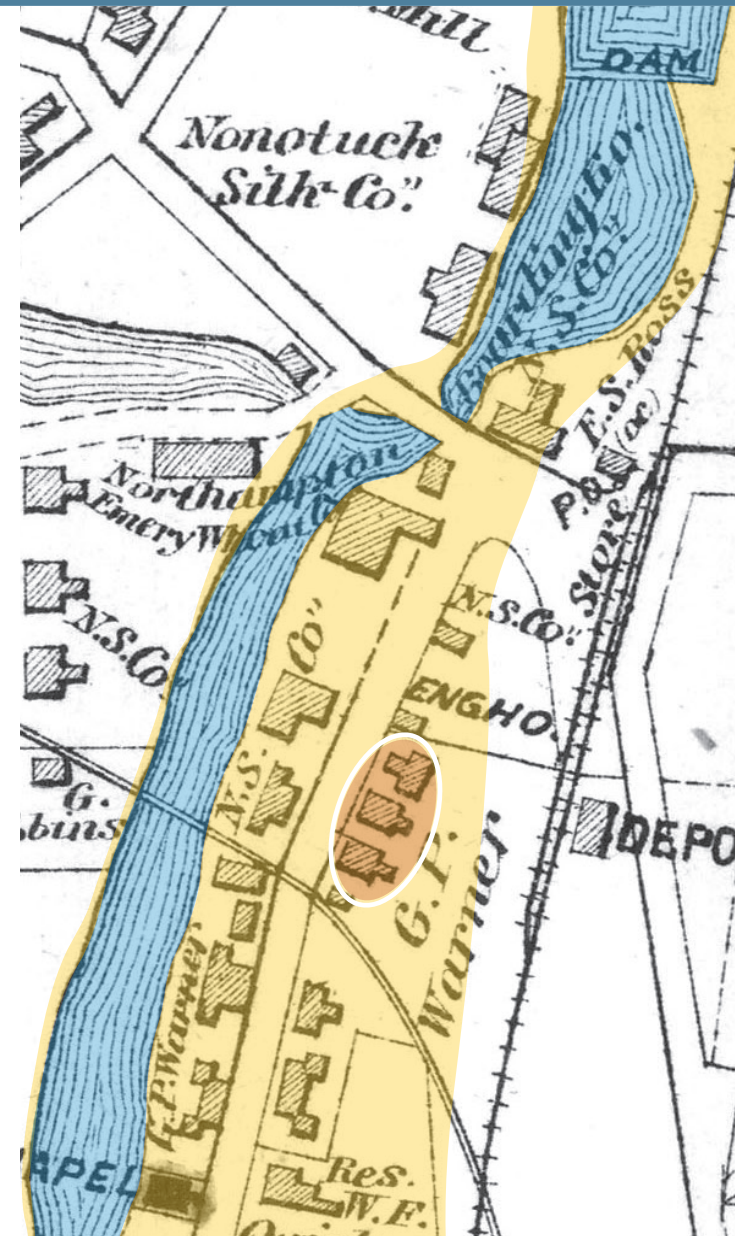


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● FLOOD'S PATH ● RIVER'S NATURAL COURSE

County Atlas of Hampshire, Massachusetts (1873)

BUILDING WRECKAGE SAVES 6 CHILDREN

The pile-up at the firehouse (engine house on map) diverted the water around the next 3 houses and saved the lives of 6 children inside one of the houses. (It is uncertain which one.) The children huddled together behind a bed on the second floor as water climbed to their necks. The houses stayed in place and the children survived. These were the only 3 houses on the street left on their original foundations.

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EMERY WHEEL COMPANY

Today's Leeds Village Apartments building was the Nonotuck silk mill, built in 1875, after the flood. Walk to the back of the parking lot and look across the river. That is where the Emery Wheel Company (A), which made grinding wheels, stood. Bookkeeper Charles Stevens was writing in a ledger when he noticed the river rising. He threw the ledgers in the safe and turned the combination lock. He checked to see that the factory had evacuated and ran across the canal to safety. The flood tore away a shop and storehouse and damaged machinery and stock.

(A) Emery Wheel Company on Water Street.
Historic Northampton

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9



DESTRUCTION ON MAIN STREET

Here, the flood knocked 2 button mill buildings off their foundations and hurled them against William Quigley's farmhouse next door. The blue-gray house at 183 and 185 Main St. replaced it.

(A) Quigley house
Historic Northampton

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QUIGLEY FAMILY SURVIVED

William Quigley's farmhouse stood here. He and his son Will were working east of the river when they heard the warning. As they desperately tried to get home, they saw their house and barn destroyed and knew their family was inside.

When the flood hit, Mrs. Quigley, daughters Nettie and Lizzie, and a friend, fled to an upstairs bedroom in the rear ell. The flood snatched away the front of the house and carried it 200 feet downstream. Then their neighbors' house crashed into the rear of the Quigley house, with their neighbor Walter Humphrey on the roof. They threw open the window and helped him into the Quigley house. All survived. At Humphrey's house, his wife and mother each grabbed a child and stood on the beds to keep the children above water. All survived.

Quigley rebuilt his house on higher ground.
The house here replaced it. *Historic Northampton*

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STORY MAP

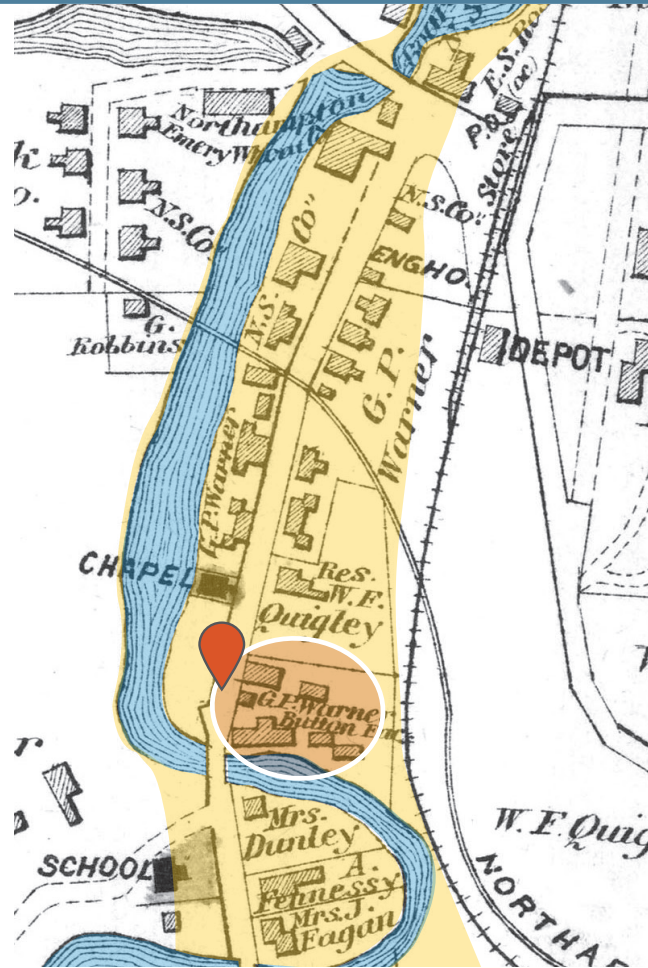


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LEEDS MARKER

11



MILL RIVER BUTTON COMPANY WASHED AWAY

Here stood the button mill (Mill River Button Company), the largest button factory in the country, where 250 people made buttons from palm-tree nuts. Those who survived ran up the stairs at the back of the brick mill to the railroad tracks (now the bike path).

Charlie Brady helped many people to safety on the bank before he was swept into the current. He plucked a child out of the water, grabbed hold of a tree, and pulled them both to safety, bruised but alive.

 You are here on map.



 FLOOD'S PATH
 RIVER'S NATURAL COURSE

County Atlas of Hampshire, Massachusetts (1873)

Photo top: Mill before the flood, 1873.
(A) Wooden mill for packing and shipping.
(B) Brick mill for manufacture.
(C) Stairs to railroad track.

Photo bottom: Mill after the flood.
(D) Stairs to railroad track and safety.

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12

THREE HOUSES AND THREE FAMILIES PERISHED HERE

The Fennessey, Fitzgerald, and Cogan houses, which stood within this loop of the river, were obliterated by the flood wave that rose 12 feet above the roofs. At the Fitzgerald house, 8 people in 4 generations died (ages 1 to 72); 6 died at the Fennessey house (ages 3 to 80); Jane Cogan died with her 2 daughters (ages 20 and 23).

The Fitzgeralds and Fennesseys are buried in St. Mary's cemetery. Cogan and her daughters are in Bridge Street cemetery.

 You are here on map.

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13

JIM DUNNING'S RIDE ENDS HERE

At the top of the village, a silk spool-room worker, Jim Dunning, rushed to get his wife and children to safety from their company house, but was swept away as he tried to rescue his father from an upstairs room. Dunning managed to exit the house and grab a piece of timber that he rode down the river. At the button mill dam, he was thrown 20 feet into the air and then plunged under water. Somehow, he emerged and reached shore near here by grabbing onto timbers and clambering across roofs. His father, Amos Dunning, age 78, would be found dead among the debris on Florence Meadows.

Debris at the stone bridge. The stone bridge is here today.
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COOK'S DAM AHEAD (unsafe to walk)

Beyond this is Cook's dam.

At 33 feet tall, it is the highest drop on the river.

Past this point, the water was too fast, deep, and laden with debris to follow the river's sharp S curve. Instead, it plowed straight ahead and plunged into the gorge below. Then it fanned out over the wide-open Leeds and Florence Meadows.

About 8:30 a.m., the flood left Leeds.

Far left: Cook's dam before the flood. The drop here is so great (33 feet) that in 1681 it was the first spot chosen for a mill in Leeds.

Top: Cook's dam after the flood.

Bottom: Searching for bodies near Cook's dam. *Historic Northampton*

*Retrace your steps on Main St. to the intersection with Mulberry.
Continue up Mulberry St. to the bike path.
(It was the location of the railroad tracks during the flood.)*



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BARN BEHIND STORE USED AS MORGUE

The gray building across the street at 11 Mulberry St. was Leeds' only store. It survived except for water in the basement. The barn behind the store was used as a temporary morgue where bodies of flood victims were taken until loved ones could claim them.

Hearing the alarm, Edson Ross, the storekeeper, pulled out the money drawers and ran. He jumped on his horse and raced to Florence to warn his father, Austin Ross, who farmed on Florence Meadow, in the direct path of the flood.

Leeds before the flood. Ross's store is at (A).

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STORY MAP

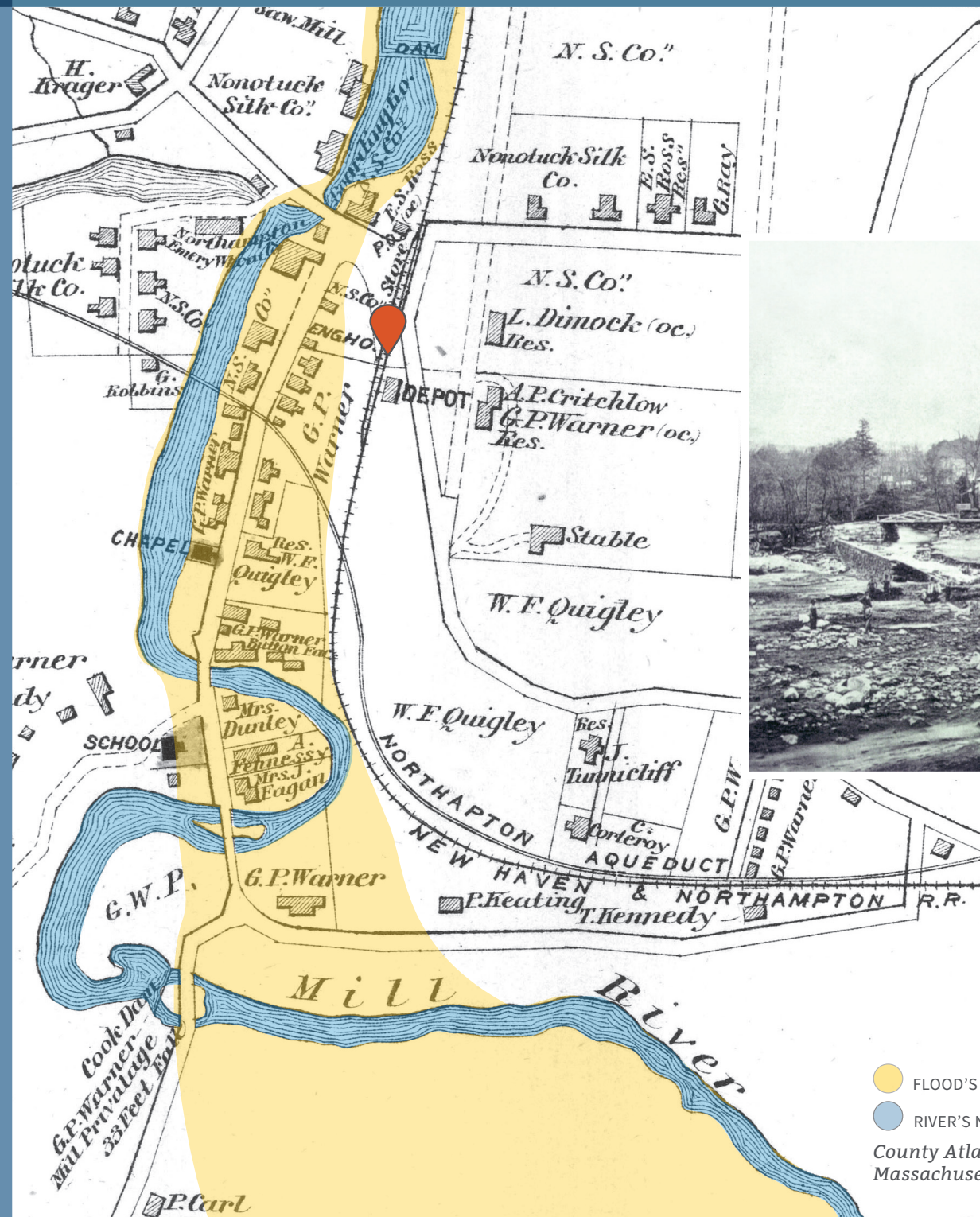


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16



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SAFETY ON THE RAILROAD TRACKS



The markers along the bike path tell the story of how people in the factories and homes along the river escaped drowning by running up to the tracks, where they watched the disaster unfold below.

 You are here on map.

From here, you can look down on Main Street, as eyewitnesses who fled up the hill to safety did as the flood washed away nearly everything in the village.

MILL RIVER FLOOD
STORY MAP



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


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SMITH
COLLEGE




Mass
Cultural
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WILLIAMSBURG




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17

LUCIUS DIMOCK BUILDS A MANSION 6 YEARS AFTER FLOOD

In 1880, 6 years after the disaster, Lucius Dimock, manager of the Nonotuck Silk Company and a director of the Williamsburg Reservoir Company, built himself a mansion high above the river.

Dimock was on the building committee of the Williamsburg dam and was vilified at the coroner's inquest as one of the key players responsible for the dam's poor design and construction.

After decades as the neighborhood's "haunted house," the mansion was converted into condominiums in 1983.

Look across the street, up the hill and through the trees to see the mansion at 1 Front Street.



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STORY MAP

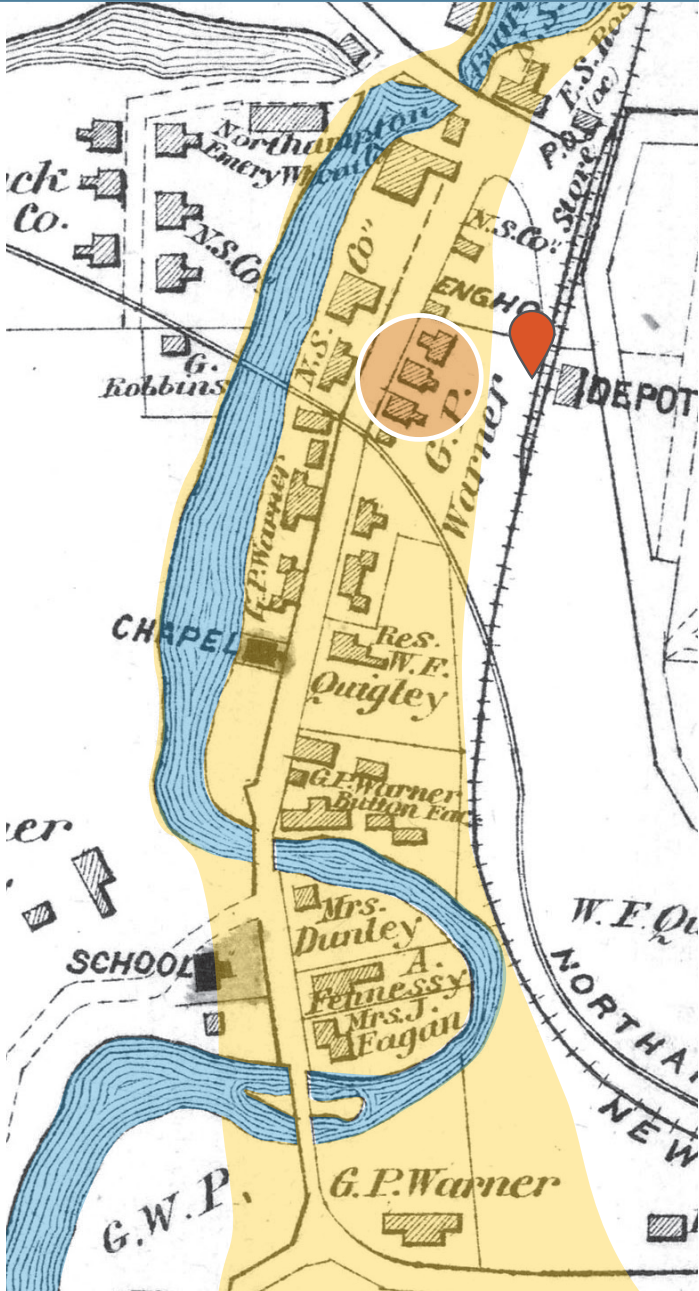


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18



THE THREE HOUSES BELOW SURVIVED

The 3 houses below survived. The pile-up at the firehouse (engine house on map) diverted the water around the next 3 houses and saved the lives of 6 children inside one of the houses. (It is uncertain which house.) The children huddled together behind a bed on the second floor as water climbed to their necks. The houses stayed in place and the children survived. These were the only 3 houses on the street left on their original foundations.

Historic Northampton

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19

EYE WITNESS TO THE DISASTER

Fred Howard, age 22, worked at the Mill River Button Company, and vividly described the flood in letters to his brother.

“When we first got the alarm ... I rushed into the carding room (A) ... After the carders and lookers were all out, I ran down stairs and met Charlie [Brady] who shouted at me to go over to the basement of the other [brick] building (B) and help get out stock. None of us realized what was coming.”


“Most of [the workers] ran ... up those stairs (C) on the railroad ... That was really the only way of escape ... Of course, some of them ran into the street and up the street to warn their friends and most of them were lost.”

(Continued on marker 20)

Mill River Button Company before the disaster.

(A) Carding room and box-making rooms.

(B) Stock in basement.

 You are here.



Historic Northampton



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TERROR ON THE TRACKS *(Fred Howard continues his letter to his brother.)*

“Annie Chamberlain . . . turned toward the mill when I caught her by the arm and fairly dragged her from the yard, reaching the railroad [here] not a second too soon, as the water was curling about us when we reached the stairs . . . I pushed Annie Chamberlain up the stairs and looking back saw Dave Duggan on top of the high fence that runs along the back of the yard and the water almost up to him. [I] shouted to him to jump, I waded in and

caught him by the collar and together we struggled to the railroad, and then came a scene that can never be described and I hope I may never see again.”

“... The whole valley was a wild torrent filled with men, women, and children, horses and cattle, trees and broken houses, the former waving their hands and crying for help till some timber struck them and either killed them outright or pushed them under and drowned them.”

“We that had escaped this [were] running up and down the railroad—as helpless as infants and almost wild because we could do nothing to help them . . . You will remember Ed Hannum (Warner’s gardener). He lost his wife and four children when we were on the railroad. He ran up and down wringing his hands and shouting at the top of his voice . . . [Will Quigley] threw himself on the ground and cried for his mother and sisters [who survived] . . . there are many incidents of this kind that I cannot write of.”

(Continued on marker 21)

Artist rendering used as a button box label by Mill River Button Company after the flood. Artist unknown.

Leeds Civic Association



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21

THE AFTERMATH


Fred Howard continues:

“All this occurred in a very short time, probably in one minute after I first saw the water ... I was on the railroad and in another minute both shops were gone and in less than ten minutes from the first warning the water had begun to recede.”

[Written three weeks later] “It grows worse every day as the excitement grows less ... We had militia and state constables here nearly all week, but the excitement is less now and we begin to realize that the village is a ruin ... You must not expect to see Leeds as you left it. Probably it will never look at all as it did.”

All that was left of the button mill is the smoke stack and flywheel.

(A) Stairs to railroad tracks. *Historic Northampton*

 You are here.

Although our Leeds walking tour ends here, the flood continued to carry bodies and debris down the river. Most of it was deposited on Florence Meadows, where the next marker is located, on Meadow Street across from the community gardens.

MILL RIVER FLOOD
STORY MAP

