

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.

FLORENCE
MARKER

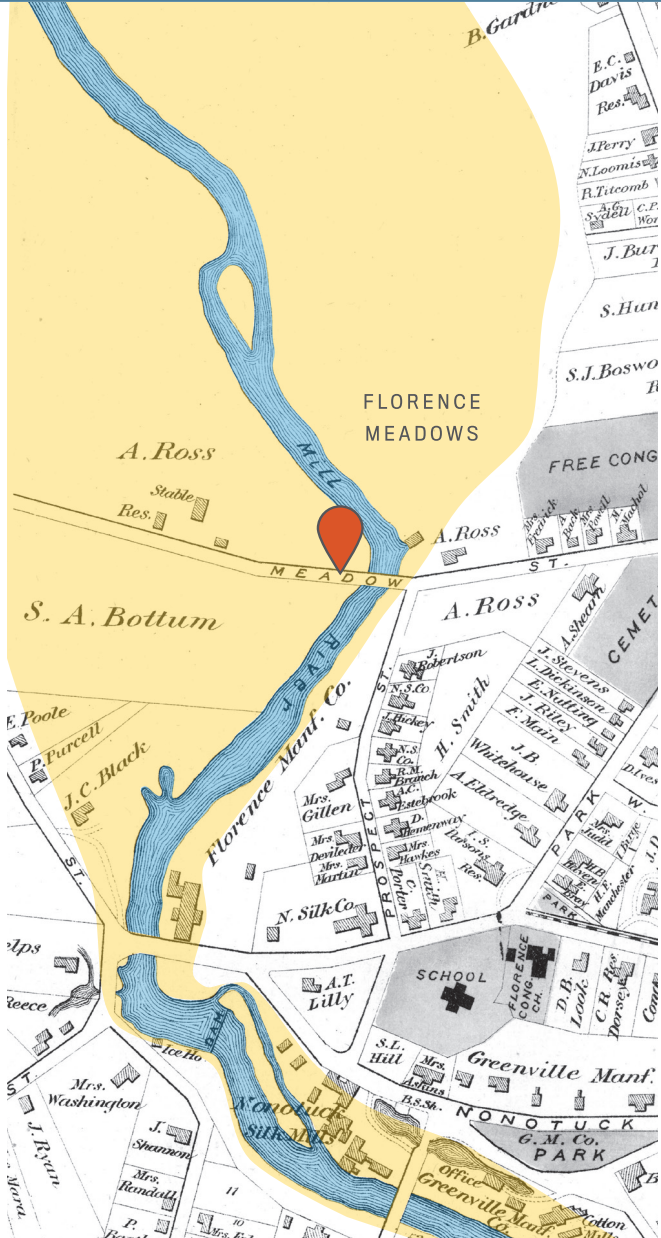
1

THE MEADOWS SLOWED THE FLOOD

The Mill River flood began when the Williamsburg Reservoir dam suddenly broke about 7:30 a.m., releasing 600 million gallons of water. By the time the flood arrived here on the Florence Meadows, it had already devastated Williamsburg, Skinnerville, Haydenville, and Leeds and killed 139 people. When the flood hit the wide, flat terrain of this meadow, it slowed down, spread out, and dropped the debris it was carrying. A warning was telegraphed down to Florence helping to ensure that there were no deaths here or further downstream. Still, bridges were carried away and factory buildings were damaged or flooded.

The once-fertile Meadows was covered with 2-3 feet of gravel topped with a 6-foot-deep tangle of trees, houses, and machinery, with at least 60 bodies lodged inside. *Historic Northampton*

 You are here on map.



 FLOOD'S PATH  RIVER'S NATURAL COURSE

County Atlas of Hampshire, Massachusetts (1873)



MILL RIVER FLOOD
STORY MAP



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60 BODIES FOUND HERE

In the hours and days after the flood, hundreds of volunteers came here from miles around to search for bodies. They found 60 bodies buried in sand beneath piles of debris or hidden within layers of compacted wreckage, many with broken bones. Farmers hitched their horses to huge beams to pull them off. Then men used saws, picks, axes, and crowbars to wrench apart other items. When a body was found, the noisy work crews turned solemn and quiet. The body was taken to one of the temporary morgues for identification. Several bodies had been carried 4 miles downstream from Williamsburg.

Hundreds of volunteers came each day for a week after the flood to search for bodies and repair the villages. Many came to gawk and a few to loot.

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AUSTIN ROSS ALERTS FARM WORKERS

It was Austin Ross's son, storekeeper Edson Ross, who raced down here from Leeds to warn his father and others in Florence. Austin Ross ran to this field and waved and shouted at his farm workers who were in the middle of the field. They didn't know what Ross was trying to say, but when they heard the torrent crash over Cook's dam at the bottom of Leeds the workers sprang into wagons and ran the horses at top speed to high land. In this house, the water floated furniture on the first floor and left 2 feet of mud in the basement.

1906 postcard of the Ross farm. This homestead is a well-documented site on the Underground Railroad.

Florence History Museum

*Florence markers are at the corner of
Ryan and Florence Roads.*

Ross Farm. Florence, Mass.

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● FLOOD'S PATH ● RIVER'S NATURAL COURSE
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THE FLOOD HITS FLORENCE ABOUT 9:00 A.M.

While the flood had lost most of its height and power on the Florence Meadows, it had enough strength to snatch up all 3 bridges in Florence and carry them downstream: the bridge across Meadow street, the Pine Street bridge, and the one at Bridge Street.

The inhabitants were warned by those upstream by telegraph from Williamsburg or by someone racing down to Florence on horseback. Damage was minor compared to upstream, and no one was killed.

Pine Street bridge ruined behind Williston cotton mill, Greenville Manuf Co., in Florence. *Historic Northampton*

📍 You are here on map.

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NONOTUCK SILK MILL SURVIVED

At the newly constructed Nonotuck Silk Mill (the same company with a factory in Leeds) the new stone dam withstood the pressure of the flood and the tangled bridges it carried. It was the only dam to remain on the river. Water rose 3 feet into the building, damaging the machinery. Parts of the wooden mill and dye house were carried away.

The Nonotuck Silk Mill was located on Nonotuck Street where Corticelli Street intersects.
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📍 You are here on map.

Go onto the bridge and look downriver to see the dam of the Nonotuck Silk Mill. Florence Marker 6 is on Meadow Street at Lilly Library.



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HEROES CEREMONY HELD AT COSMIAN HALL

On the evening of November 10, 1874, a ceremony was held at Cosmian Hall, which stood here. The mill owners presented the 4 heroes of the day—George Cheney, Collins Graves, Jerome Hillman, and Myron Day—with engraved gold medals in velvet-lined boxes. These 4 men, and others not recognized with medals, had risked their lives to warn citizens about the oncoming flood. One side read:

“Mill River Reservoir Disaster, May 16, 1874.”

On the other side, was the name of the recipient and the words “humanity” and “courage.”

Cosmian Hall was the home of the Free Congregational Society. Front and back of Myron Day’s medal. Diameter is 2 inches.

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