

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.

NORTHAMPTON
MARKER

1

HOE FACTORY SUSTAINS DAMAGE

The Clement and Hawks Manufacturing Company, located just below the dam on this side of the river, was the only factory damaged in Northampton. (In the 1870s it made agricultural tools and was called the hoe factory.) A 100-foot chunk of the dam was torn away. When 6 feet of water entered the forging shop it extinguished the fires and sent off so much steam that people thought the building was on fire. Factory owner William Clement had been president of the Williamsburg Reservoir Company when the dam was designed and a member of the building committee, but at the coroner's inquest he professed to know little about the dam and blamed its failure on the contractors.

In 1885, workers repair the dam of what was then the Maynard Hoe Factory. *Historic Northampton*

Northampton markers continue at City Hall on Main Street.



MILL RIVER FLOOD
STORY MAP



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NORTHAMPTON READY FOR FLOOD

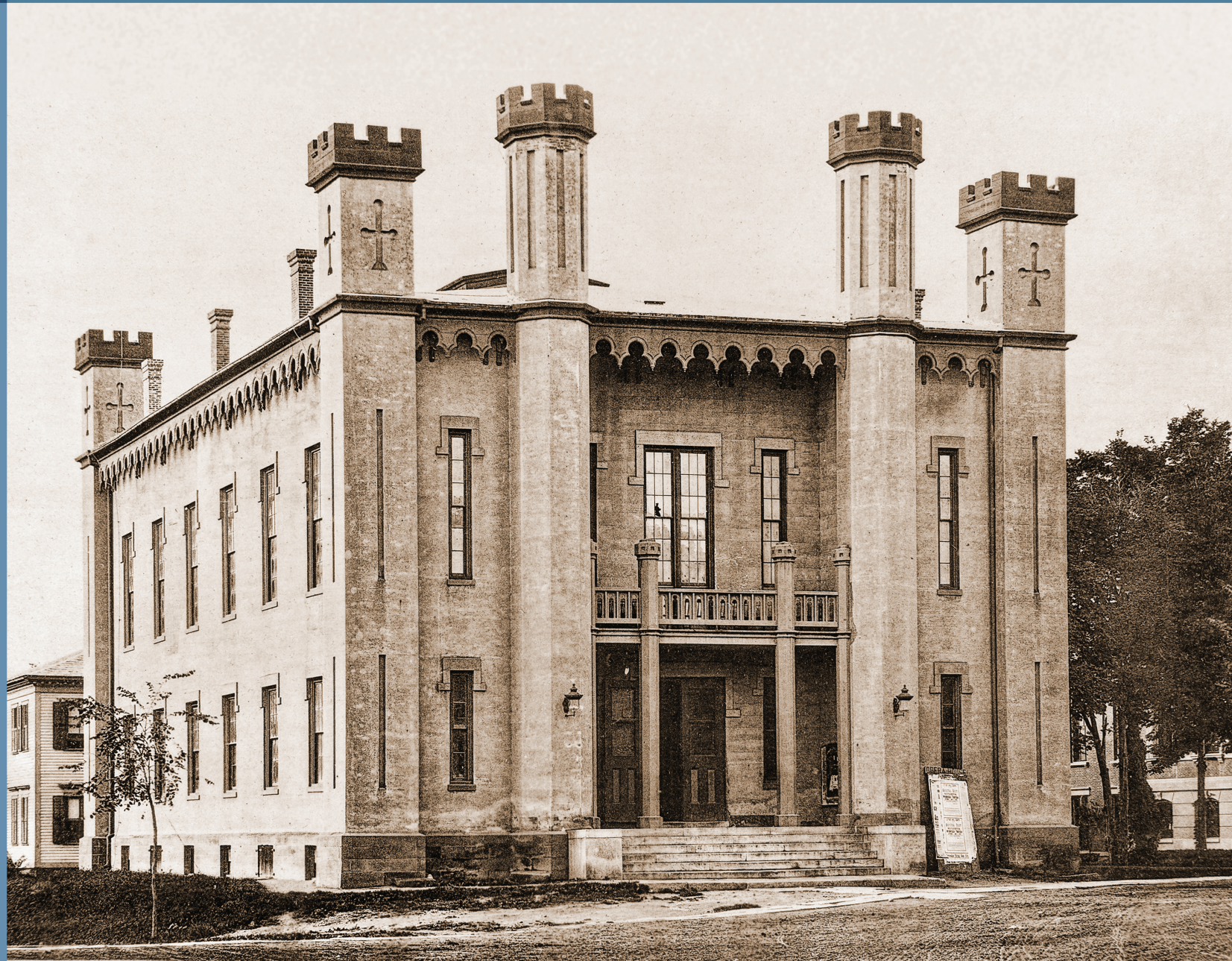
In downtown Northampton, the river began to rise at 9:30 a.m. (2 hours after the Williamsburg dam broke) and reached its highest level at 11:00 a.m. By noon, the river was back in its natural channel.

In 4.5 hours, from 7:30 a.m. until noon, the contents of the reservoir, 600 million gallons of water, had laid waste to an 11 mile stretch along the Mill River.

Town Hall held a supply depot to dispense donated food and clothing to the 740 people (in 146 families) left destitute by the disaster. Northampton residents were so generous with food donations that by Tuesday (3 days after the flood) supplies had run low and officials were begging surrounding towns for food.

Northampton town hall, built 1850. Officials from the affected villages met here to plan the relief effort. A total of \$75,683.08 (over \$2 million today) was received from around the nation.

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A TANGLE OF BRIDGES

The flood ripped the iron bridge at West Street from its piers and carried it downstream where it pushed aside the New Haven and Northampton Railroad bridge and finally came to rest on one of the South Street bridge's wooden underpinnings (pictured here). The engineer of an approaching locomotive saw that the tracks were gone, stopped the train, and backed up to the station.

In 1874 the Mill River ran through town, just on the south side of the bike path. The river was rerouted to its present location after the 1936 flood.

In Northampton the West Street bridge twisted and lodged under the South St Bridge.

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SERVICES CANCELED TO LOOK FOR BODIES MAY 17, 1874

This notice was posted in Northampton on Sunday morning, the day after the flood:

“All able-bodied men are summoned to the relief of the people of the Mill River Valley.”

Beginning at 7:00 a.m., just 24 hours after the flood, the bell of this church rang slowly and ceaselessly until men and boys old enough to wield picks and shovels filled Main Street and then moved up the Valley to search for the dead. The day’s usual services were canceled.

First Church was built on this site in 1812. It burned in 1876.
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HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE EXPOSES TRUTH ABOUT THE FAULTY DAM

Joel Hayden Jr. admitted to *Hampshire Gazette* editor Henry Gere that his father Joel Hayden, who was president of the Williamsburg Reservoir Company, worried about the dam’s safety. He was:

“always in fear of this reservoir dam. He believed it to be weak and dangerous . . when there was a heavy rain he could not sleep at night . . . Several times I have known him to get up in the night and drive up to the reservoir to examine it, so as to personally satisfy him that it was all right.”

- You are here on map.
- (A) First Church
 - (B) Hampshire County Courthouse
 - (C) Offices of the Hampshire Gazette
 - (D) Whitney building held printing shops and a stove store

H.H. Bailey & Co. “Northampton, Mass.” Map, 1875.
Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center,
Boston Public Library

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WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MILL RIVER DISASTER?

The coroner's inquest, adjourned from Williamsburg, reopened here on May 25, 1874 and lasted 6 more days with 42 witnesses called. The inquest jury found fault with the following:

- 1) the "delinquent legislation" which chartered the reservoir company without a guarantee of safety for life and property;
- 2) the proprietors of the Williamsburg Reservoir Company which owned the dam;
- 3) the engineers who designed the dam and did not superintend the construction;
- 4) the contractors who built the dam; and
- 5) the County Commissioners who passed its inspection.

There were no indictments, and no civil suits were carried out.

The inquest was held in the Hampshire County courthouse which stood here. It was erected in 1823 and replaced with the present courthouse in 1887. *Historic Northampton*

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TRAINS BRING AID, SIGHTSEERS, AND LOOTERS

Beginning the day of the flood, trains brought supplies, volunteers, sightseers, people seeking loved ones, and newspaper reporters. Fred Howard of Leeds wrote to his brother: “extra trains were run all day Sunday as fast as they dare go and every train brought fourteen car loads crowded and the teams come in from every direction in an unbroken stream all day.”

Visitors climbing over the ruins of the dam.

(A) East side where the break occurred.

(B) West wall

Historic Northampton

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