

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.

WILLIAMSBURG
MARKER

1



The ruins of the dam. George Cheney, the dam keeper, lived here (A) next to the dam. (B) marks the ruins of the west wall. (C) is the housing for the gate pipe that ran through the dam. The dam created a reservoir that was used to supply water to power machinery at the factories downstream. *Historic Northampton*



George Cheney, *Harper's Weekly*



George Cheney didn't take time to saddle his horse.

ONslow SPELMAN HOUSE: FIRST WARNING ABOUT 7:30 A.M.

George Cheney's job was to watch the Williamsburg dam, located 3 miles above the village. About 7:15 a.m., he saw that the dam was breaking and jumped on his horse and raced 3 miles down the river road (Ashfield Road) to this house to alert Onslow Spelman, the owner of a button factory and the secretary-treasurer of the Williamsburg Reservoir Company. Spelman protested that it couldn't be true and argued with Cheney. After valuable minutes were lost, Spelman told Cheney to ride on to warn the villages downriver. Cheney dashed off to Belcher's livery stable on Main Street for a fresh horse and to warn the village.

MILL RIVER FLOOD
STORY MAP



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2

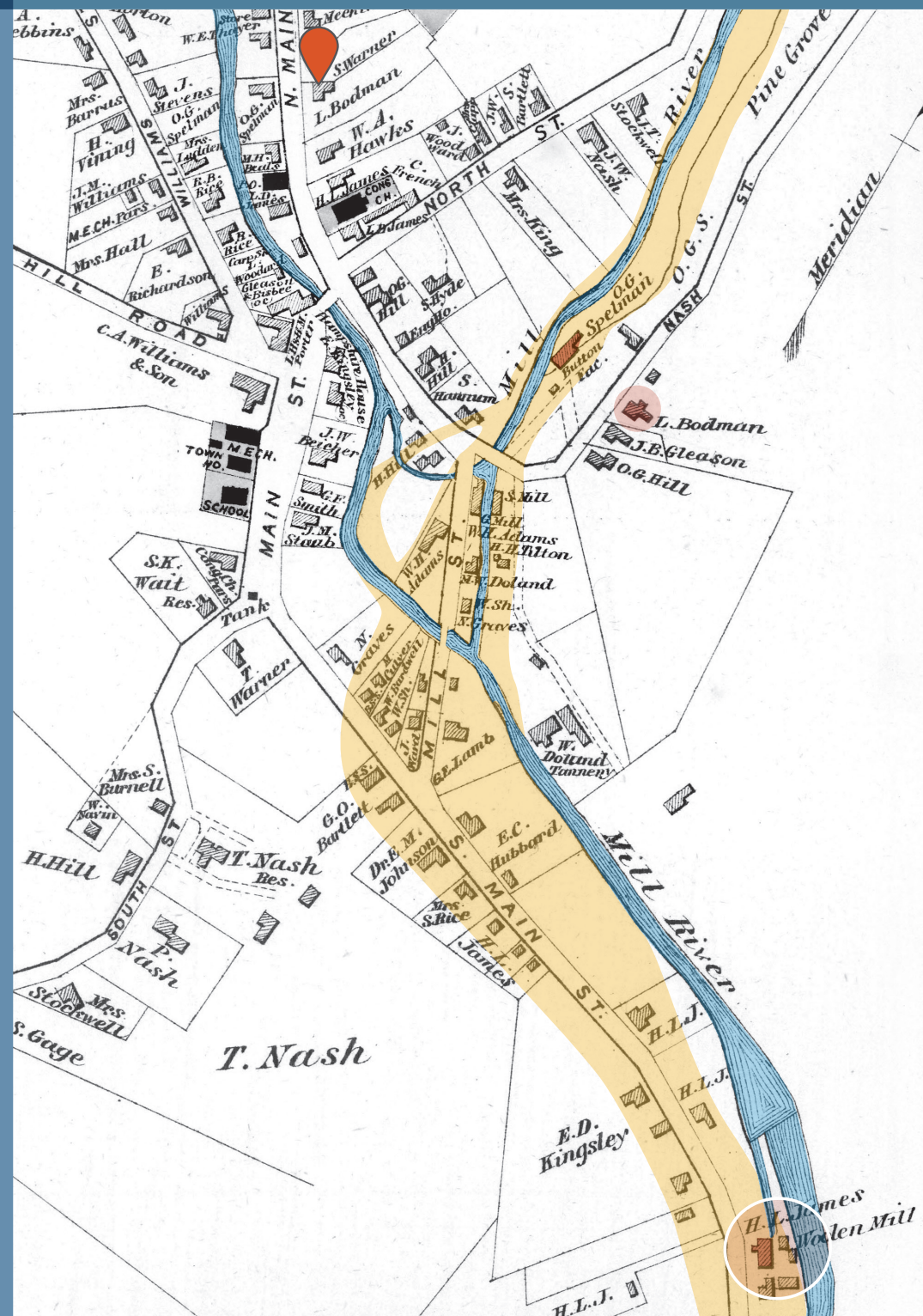
LEWIS BODMAN IS WARNED NEXT



John Gleason, who was in Spelman's yard peddling meat, overheard Cheney and Spelman argue about whether the dam was breaking. Gleason then came here to alert Lewis Bodman, a former owner of the woolen mill at the south end of the village. He had been a director of the reservoir company when the dam was built in 1865. At the inquest after the flood, Bodman testified that he knew the dam wasn't safe at first, but that after repairs in 1866 he thought there was no danger, despite persistent leaks and villagers' concerns.

To quiet public opinion, the reservoir company called for the county commissioners to inspect the dam in 1867. The commissioners failed the dam, and the reservoir company spent \$5-10,000 on improvements. The commissioners accepted the dam in 1868, thereby limiting the reservoir company's liability if it broke.

Lewis Bodman sold the mill to Henry James.

 You are here on map.



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

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MILL RIVER FLOOD
STORY MAP

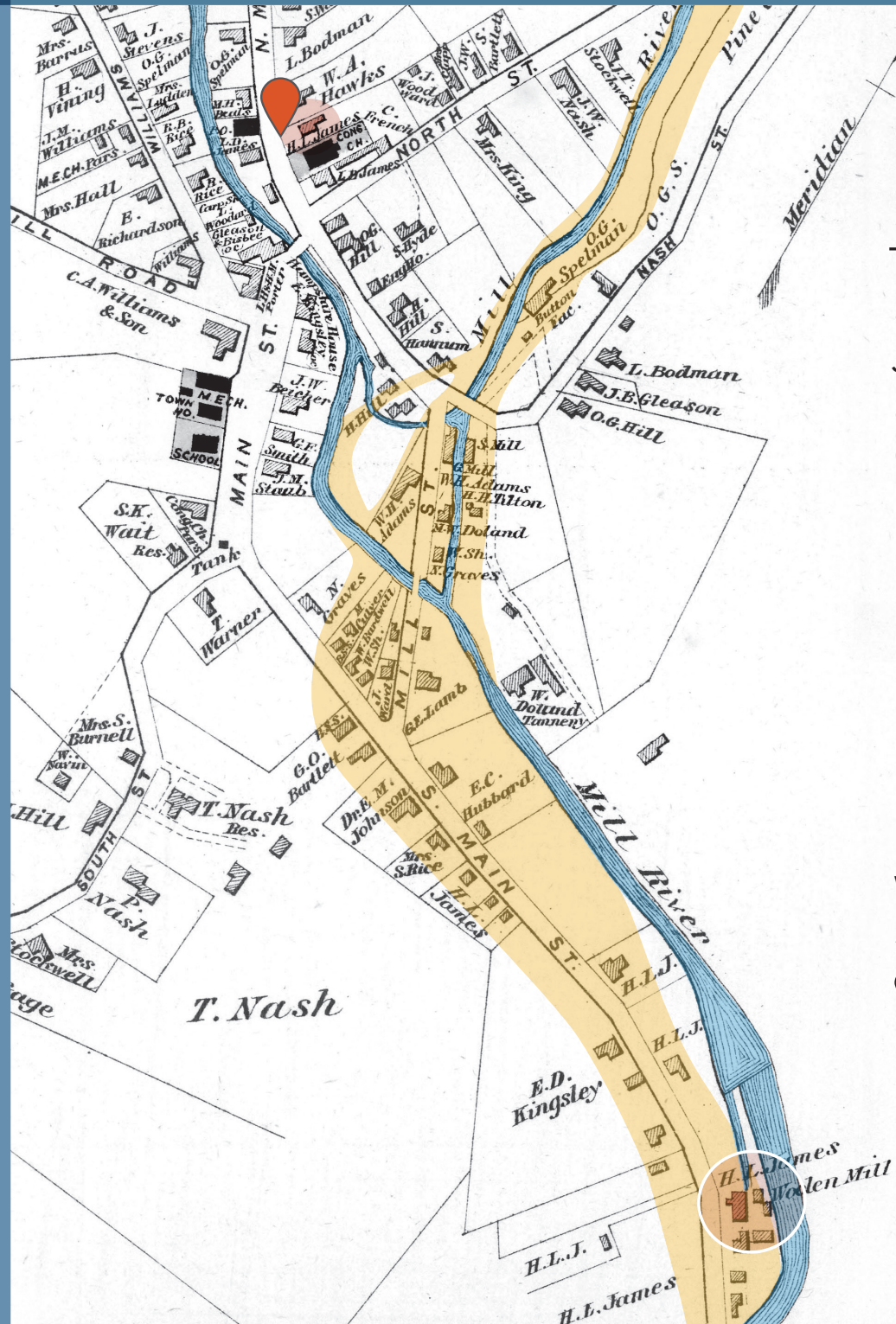


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3




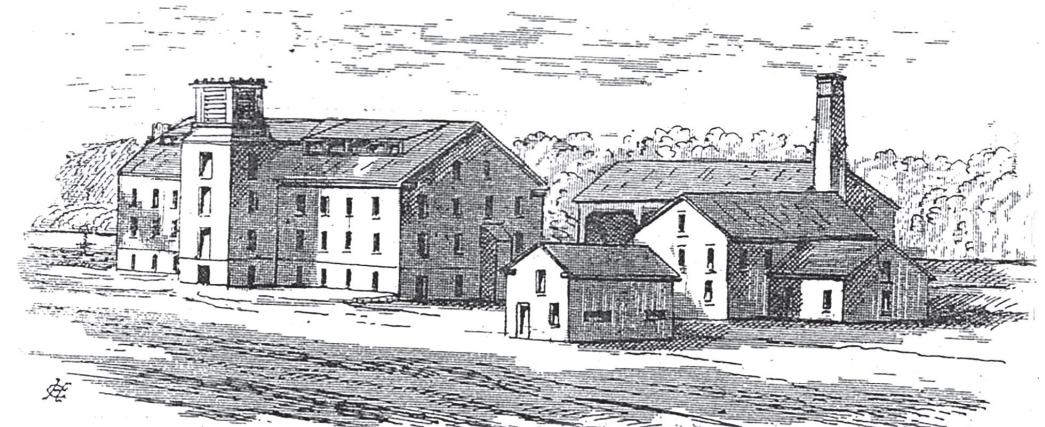
MILL OWNER HENRY JAMES WARNED

This was the home of Henry James, who owned the woolen mill at the south end of Williamsburg village. On the morning of the flood, James and his wife were in New York City ready to sail to Europe that afternoon. At 9 a.m., James received this telegram from his bookkeeper Gaius Wood and returned home:

“The Williamsburg Reservoir gave way this morning and washed away half the village. Our factory stands. Don’t sail. Answer here. Spelman and Skinner’s factory gone.”

Cheney had alerted Gaius Wood, who was standing in front of the store across the street from here.



 You are here on map.



Henry James's woolen mill before the flood. *The Daily Graphic*

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4

FIRST FUNERALS HELD HERE, SUNDAY MAY 17, 1874

Here, on the church lawn, on Sunday afternoon, the day after the flood, the first funeral was held for 9 victims. The bodies were brought outside the church in hearses and wagons from the temporary morgue in the town hall. Three local ministers presided from the church steps. The cortege then proceeded up Village Hill Road to the cemetery.

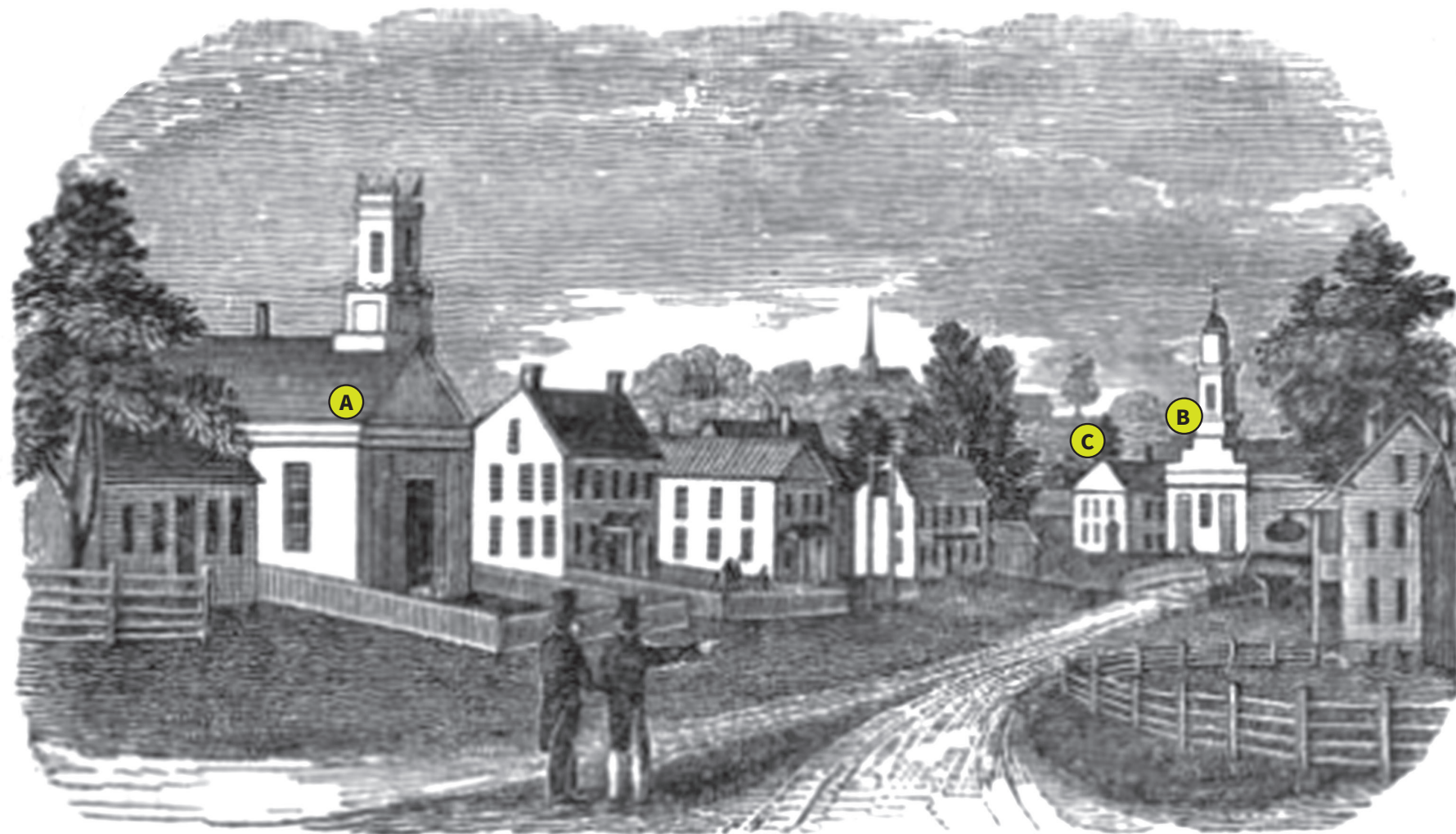
John Belcher was able to ring the church bell only once or twice to warn the village before the flood overflowed the riverbanks.

(A) Town Hall

(B) Church

(C) Henry James's house

*Cross North St., bearing left onto East Main St.
Look for a brown wooden building on the left
with the Boy Scouts emblem on it.*



Southern view of Williamsburg. John Warner Barber, *Historical Collections of Massachusetts*, 1839

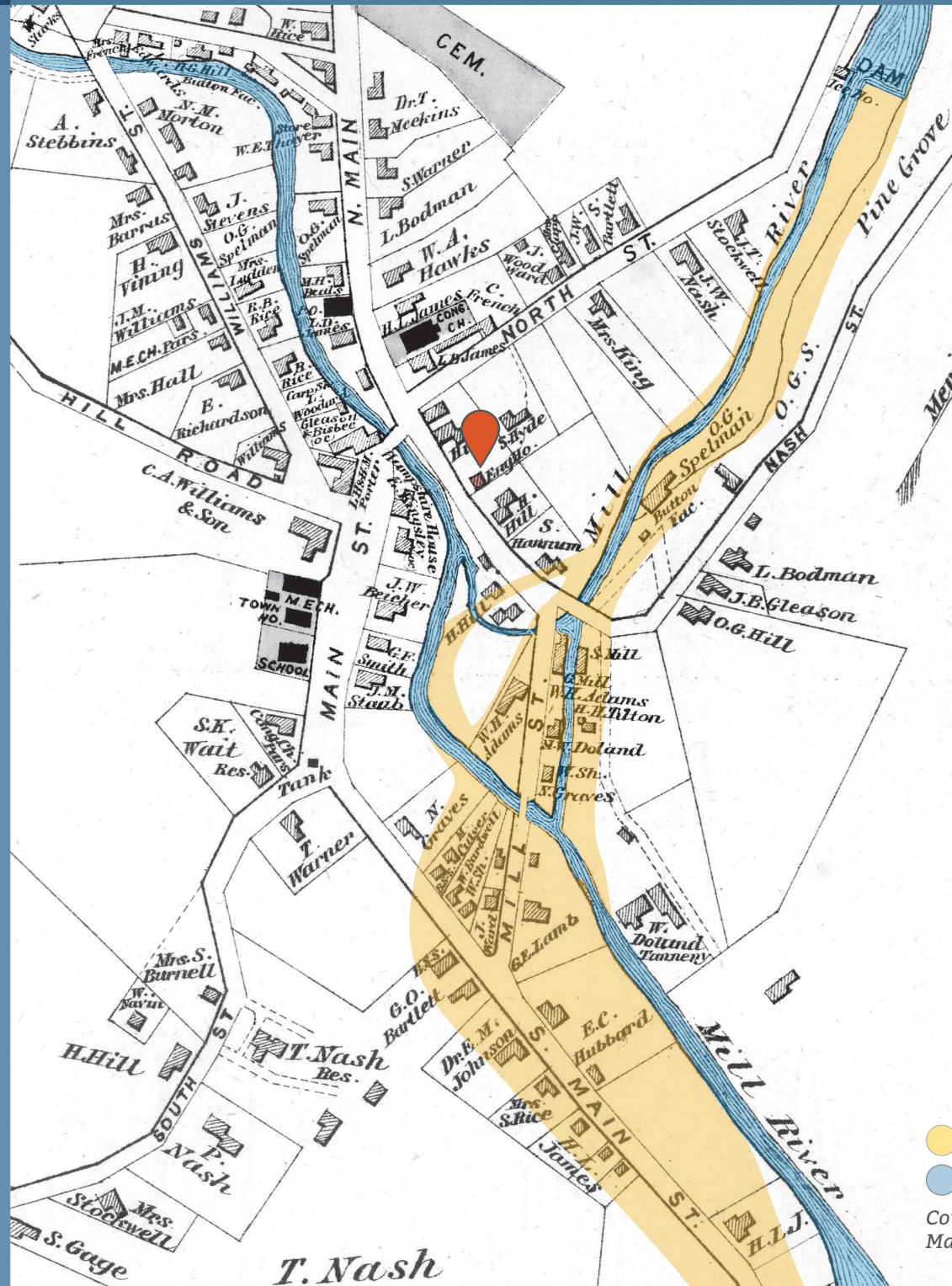


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FIREHOUSE HERE UNTOUCHED BY FLOOD

This section of the village, near the West Branch of the Mill River, was untouched by the disaster. It was the East Branch of the Mill River that flooded. The flood entered the village 100 yards east of this point (ahead) at Mill Street. The engine house was a shed for fire-fighting equipment.

 You are here, at Engine House.

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6



FLOOD ENTERS THE VILLAGE HERE, SOMETIME BEFORE 8 A.M.

After the flood swept away Spelman's button mill (one-quarter mile north, between the river and Nash Hill Road), the flood jumped upon the village. Eugene Davis saw a flood wave 20-30 feet high:

"A great mass of brush, trees, and trash was rolling rapidly toward me. I have tried many times to describe how this appeared; perhaps the best simile is that of hay rolling over and over as a hayrake moves along the field, only this roll seemed 20 feet high, and the spears of grass in the hayrake enlarged to limbs and trunks of trees mixed with boards and timbers; at this time I saw no water."

Ruins of Onslow Spelman's button factory, which was destroyed moments before the flood hit the village.

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7



TREES SAVE HIRAM HILL'S HOUSE

The Spencer Hannum family ran here from across the street and huddled inside with the Hiram Hill family. Timbers from Spelman's mill (a quarter mile upriver) and uprooted trees carried by the flood were caught by 2 trees in front of this house. The debris formed a barrier which divided the flood around the house, saving the Hannums and the Hills inside.

Hiram Hill's house after the flood.
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8



MILL STREET DESTROYED

Below this point, the flood swept Mill Street clean down to bedrock and killed 18 people on the street.

Far left: Before the flood, looking up Mill Street from Main Street. Adams's grist mill (A) is on the left and his sawmill (B) is on the right. Both were destroyed.

Left: A view down what had been Mill Street, showing several trees with bark and branches battered by debris to a height of 20 feet.

Williamsburg Historical Society



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9

GRIST MILL IS DESTROYED

This historic yellow building here today is on the site of William Adams's grist mill, which was destroyed. It is similar in appearance. Adams was warned by Robert Loud, who saw the dam break from his home high on Merritt's Hill and ran 2.5 miles down to Adams's grist mill. Winded and unable to speak, Loud threw a stick at Adams, who looked up to see the rising stream. Adams crossed the river and found his wife and 2 sons were safe. When he tried to cross again to get back to the sawmill, he was knocked down. His body was found a mile downstream. It was said that Loud never recovered from the run.

Site of Adams's grist mill looking downriver.
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10

LOWER MILL STREET DESTROYED

Ahead is where the East and West branches of the Mill River meet. Across the river is the lower half of Mill Street. The flood wiped out all the buildings on both sides of the street (except for 1 house) and forced the river out of its normal channel. It formed a new course across Main Street over the flat lands south of Williamsburg village. It destroyed most of the houses from here to the James woolen mill at the bottom of the village, and killed 26 people.

Mill Street looking southeast past the grist mill site.

Historic Northampton

Now retrace your steps up E. Main St., turning left onto North St. and crossing the bridge to Rt. 9. The tour continues along Rt. 9/Main Street south.



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11



CHENEY GETS A FRESH HORSE

Across Main Street from here was John Belcher's home (now brown in color) with a livery stable behind. Cheney's horse was exhausted by the 3-mile race from the dam to the village (see Marker 1), so Cheney rushed here for a fresh horse and banged on Belcher's door. Belcher was still dressing when he answered and got Cheney a new horse. This part of the village was not flooded.

John Belcher's house is the brown house across the street.

Williamsburg Historical Society

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12



COLLINS GRAVES BEGINS HIS RIDE

Collins Graves, on his morning rounds in his milk wagon, saw a distraught

Cheney at Belcher's livery stable and asked what was wrong. When Cheney told him the dam was giving way, Graves took off downriver to warn the villages and left Cheney to warn Williamsburg. This was about the same time the dam broke. It might have been about 7:30 a.m., but no one knows for sure.

Above: Collins Graves, *Harper's Weekly*

Left: Collins Graves in his wagon at his house.

Williamsburg Historical Society

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13



CHENEY ALARMS WILLIAMS HOUSE HOTEL

George Cheney, the dam keeper now on a fresh horse, rode through town warning people that the dam had broken. He saw Theodore Hitchcock, the miller, coming out of the hotel

and told him the dam was breaking. Hitchcock first ran home to warn his wife and then to the grist mill to get his business ledgers. Before he reached the mill, he was killed by the flood wave. Cheney warned as many people as he could in the village before he was cut off by rising water. He headed back home to the dam and found his family safe. He had been gone for about an hour and a half. His wife said the dam broke about 20 minutes after he left for Williamsburg. She said it sounded “like an earthquake.” The boom was heard as far away as Goshen.

Above: George Cheney, *Harper's Weekly*

Left: Williams Hotel, *Historic Northampton*



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14



BODIES BROUGHT TO WILLIAMSBURG TOWN HALL LATER THAT DAY

Here, in the Williamsburg town hall, was where bodies of victims were brought and laid out on rude boards, covered with sheets. Slips of paper with names, if known, were pinned on the sheets. People were let in, 1 or 2 at a time, to seek loved ones. Some victims could be identified only by the rings on their fingers.

*History of the Mill River Disaster, in Hampshire County, Mass.,
written and published by George H. Wood in 1874*

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15



CORONER'S INQUEST BEGAN HERE, MAY 20, 1874

On May 20, the fourth day after the flood, the first meeting of the coroner's inquest took place here. The inquest was into the death of John Atkinson, as representative of all the victims. Atkinson, age 48, was a native of England and an employee of the Henry James woolen mill in Williamsburg.

His body was found in Leeds. After the 6 jurors were sworn in, they traveled up to the dam to inspect the ruins. The remaining 6 days of the inquest were held at the Hampshire County Courthouse in Northampton. "It's the dam we are trying" was how the special coroner described the inquest.

Above: Williamsburg Town Hall

Left: Visitors examine the dam ruins. (A) East bank, where the break occurred.

(B) is the remnant of the west side of the core wall. The dam was 600 feet long and 43 feet high. It held back 100 acres of water that was used to power the mills downstream.

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16

NO ONE HEARS COLLINS GRAVES'S CRIES TO FLEE



From this point south and east along Main Street, the flood swept over every building until it hit the James woolen mill (located where the Colonial Shoppes are now). The first house was Edgar Chandler's.

He was a railroad conductor who arrived in New Haven to learn that his house was gone, along with his wife Caroline and their 8-year-old daughter Mary. Next was the home of the Alexander Roberts family, which had just sat down to breakfast. The only survivor was 10-year-old George. He was 1 of 12 children who lost both parents in the disaster.

Above: In 2 houses (1 pictured), the flood killed Elizabeth Kingsley, her daughter-in-law Annie Kingsley, and her 2 children, ages 3 and 1.

Left: James's mill in the distance.

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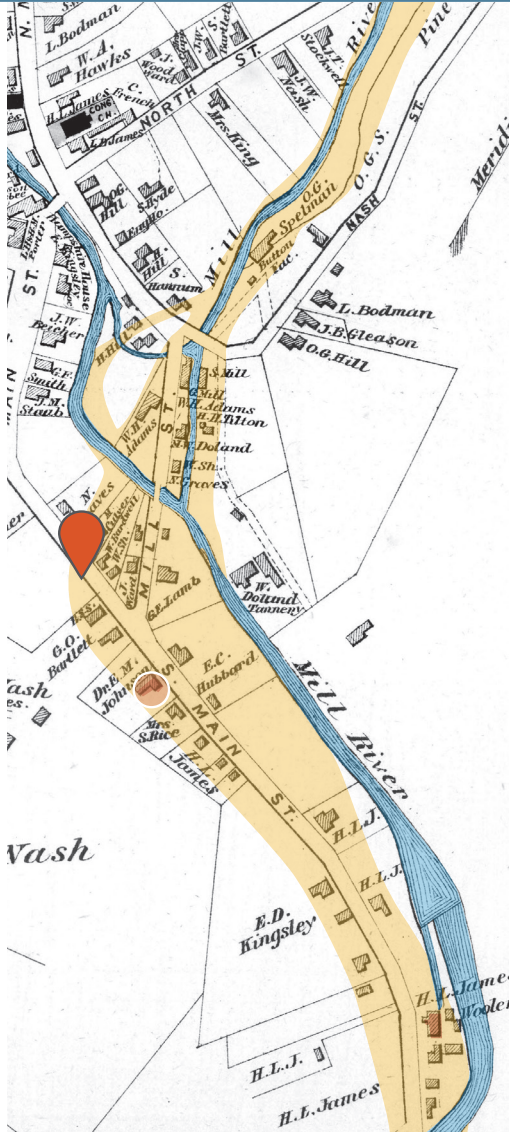


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● FLOOD'S PATH ● RIVER'S NATURAL COURSE
County Atlas of Hampshire,
Massachusetts (1873)

NO TRACE LEFT OF THE JOHNSONS' HOUSE

All the way down this street, Collins Graves saw no one as he raced by. Still, he shouted a warning: “The reservoir’s here! Head for the hills!” Half-way down the stretch to the James woolen mill and on this side of the street lived Elbridge Johnson, the village doctor, who was home with his wife, son, age 8, daughters, ages 6 and 4, and his mother. Someone on the river bank saw Johnson running out of the house carrying 2 of his children with his wife holding the other until the flood killed them all.

Rev. Gleason of the Williamsburg Congregational Church put up signs marking the locations of houses that were swept away. This sign read “Dr. Johnson’s—six drowned.” *Historic Northampton*

📍 You are here on map.

Return to your car and drive south along Rt. 9, stopping at Colonial Shoppes on your left. (You would have been caught up in the flood.)



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18

WOOLEN MILL SURVIVED FLOOD

Henry James's woolen mill was located behind this building on this side of the river. Collins Graves stopped long enough to warn Thomas Brazel, a wool spinner, who was standing in the doorway. Brazel warned the workers, and they all escaped. The flood water rose to the second floor, overturned vats of dye, and swept up a storehouse with a \$15,000 supply of raw wool. The wooden mill building survived, but the flood cut a new channel for the river on the opposite side of the mill, where Route 9 is now. Eight houses belonging to the mill were destroyed and 14 employees and family members died.

Historic Northampton



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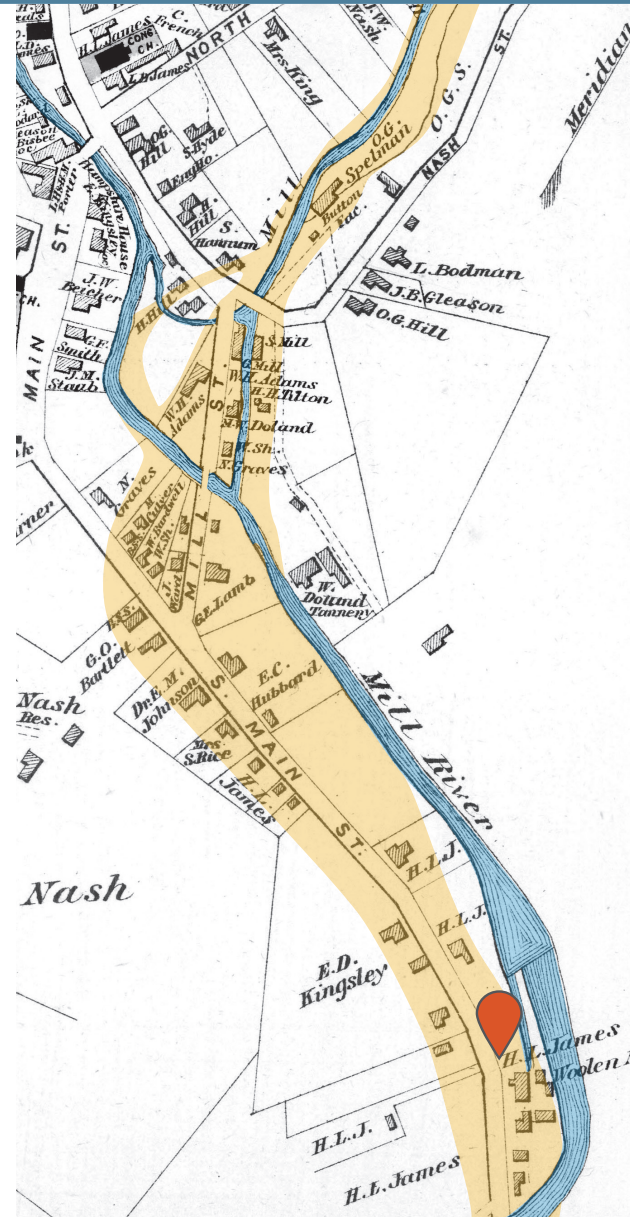


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County Atlas of Hampshire, Massachusetts (1873)

DESTRUCTION AND DEATH IN WILLIAMSBURG

It took only a few minutes for the flood to grind its way through Williamsburg, rolling at perhaps 9 miles per hour. When it left, it had killed 57 people, including 22 children under the age of 16. Twenty of the bodies would be found in the cove up Joe Wright's brook near the Williamsburg depot. A total of 195 people were left destitute.

Skinnerville was next in the flood's path.

Twenty bodies were found amid this debris with the iron bridge from the James woolen mill laid on top.

Historic Northampton

📍 You are here on map.

This ends the Williamsburg tour. To reach the Skinnerville tour, drive south to the Village Green greenhouse and Local Burgy on your left. Park there.



MILL RIVER FLOOD
STORY MAP

