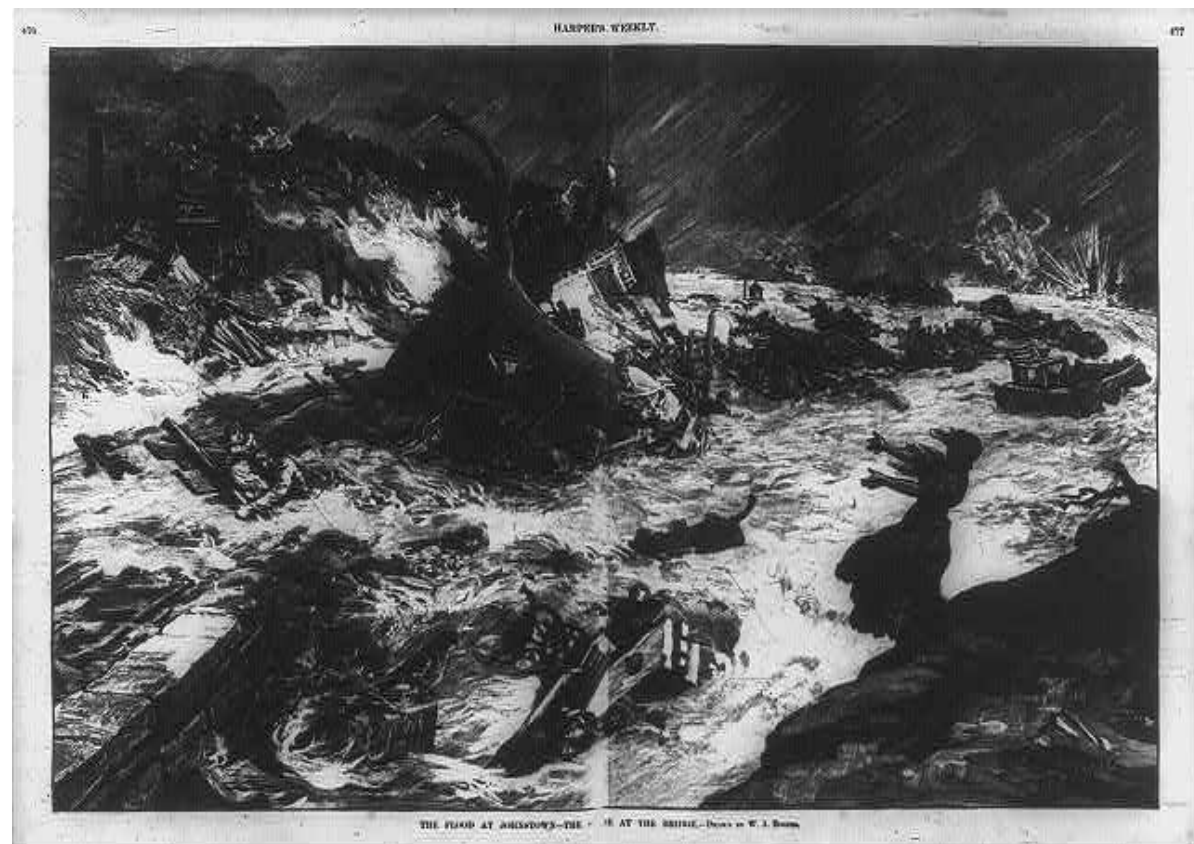


**National History Day Topic: The Johnstown Flood**  
**Developed by: Stevie Kline and Joyce Mason**  
**Date: Nov. 7, 2013**

**Primary Source #1**



Title: The Flood at Johnstown - The scene at the bridge

Date Created/Published: 1899, Harper's Weekly

Medium: 1 print: wood engraving.

Summary: Dramatic flood scene, Johnstown, Pa. 1889; Pennsylvania RR Bridge washing away.

Persistent URL: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004677330/>

**An hour of flood, a night of flame,  
A week of woe without a name,  
A week when sleep with hop had fled,  
While misery hunted for its dead;  
A week of corpses by the mile,  
A long, long week without a smile,  
A week whose tale no tongue can tell,  
A week without a parallel!  
All the horrors that hell could wish,  
Such was the price that was paid for—fish**

**Introduction:**

According to authors David McCullough and Richard O'Connor, Isaac G. Reed, a local Johnstown poet, wrote this poem shortly after an 1889 flood. His words were aimed at the members of a private fishing and hunting club. What had happened in Johnstown that so angered the poet? What had the members of the fishing club done to deserve such wrath? How could the poet place sole blame on the members?

The Johnstown Flood (or Great Flood of 1889 as it became known locally) occurred on May 31, 1889. It was the result of the catastrophic failure of the South Fork Dam situated on the Little Conemaugh River 14 miles (23 km) upstream of the town of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, USA, made worse by several days of extremely heavy rainfall. The dam's failure unleashed a torrent of 20 million tons of water from the reservoir known as Lake Conemaugh. With a volumetric flow rate that temporarily equaled that of the Mississippi River, the flood killed 2,209 people and caused seventeen million dollars of damage (the equivalent of about \$425 million in 2012 dollars).

It was the first major disaster relief effort handled by the new American Red Cross, led by Clara Barton. Support for victims came from all over the United States and 18 foreign countries. After the flood, survivors suffered a series of legal defeats in their attempts to recover damages from the dam's owners. Public indignation at that failure prompted the development in American law changing a fault-based regime to strict liability.

Ninety-nine entire families died in the flood, including 396 children. One hundred twenty-four women and 198 men were widowed, 98 children were orphaned. One-third of the dead, 777 people, were never identified; their remains were buried in the "Plot of the Unknown" in Grandview Cemetery in Westmont.

It was the worst flood to hit the U.S. in the 19th century. Sixteen hundred homes were destroyed, \$17 million in property damage was done, and 4 square miles of downtown Johnstown were completely destroyed. Clean-up operations continued for years. Although Cambria Iron and Steel's facilities were heavily damaged, they returned to full production within a year and a half.

In the years following the disaster, some people blamed the members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club for their modifications to the dam and failure to maintain it properly. The club had bought and redesigned the dam to turn the area into a vacation retreat in the mountains. They were accused of failing to maintain the dam properly, so that it was unable to contain the additional water of the unusually heavy rainfall.

The club was successfully defended by the firm of Knox and Reed (now Reed Smith LLP), whose partners Philander Knox and James Hay Reed were both Club members. The Club was never held legally responsible for the disaster. The court held the dam break to have been an Act of God, and granted the survivors no legal compensation.

Individual members of the club, millionaires in their day, contributed significantly to the recovery. Along with about half of the club members, Henry Clay Frick donated thousands of dollars to the relief effort in Johnstown. After the flood, Andrew Carnegie, already known as an industrialist and philanthropist, built the town a new library.

Survivors were unable to recover damages in court because of the club's lack of resources. First, the wealthy club owners had designed the club's financial structure to keep their personal assets separated from it and, secondly, it was difficult for any suit to prove that any particular owner had behaved negligently. Though the former reason was probably more central to the failure of survivors' suits against the club, the latter received coverage and extensive criticism in the national press.

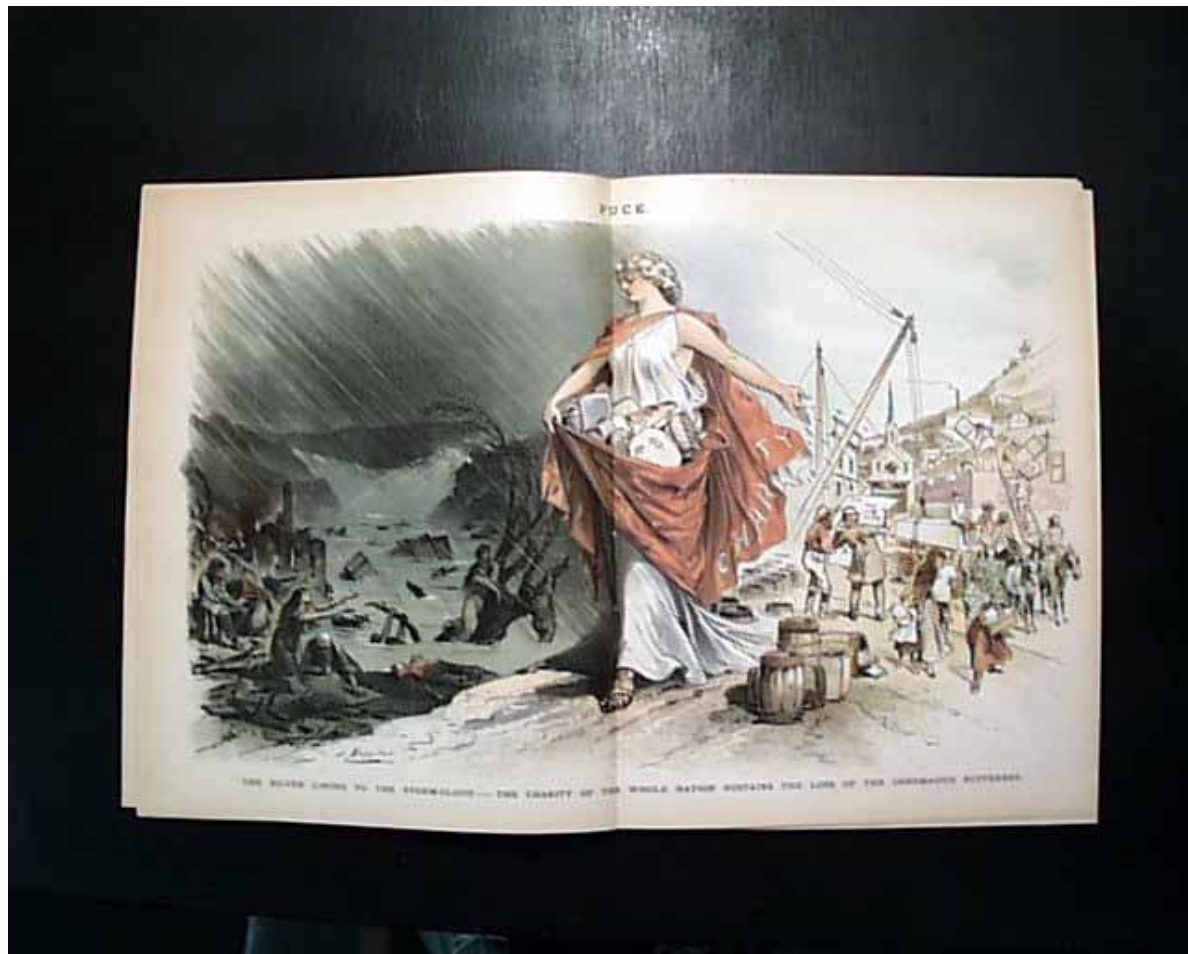
As a result of this criticism, in the 1890s, state courts around the country adopted *Rylands v. Fletcher*, a British common-law precedent which had formerly been largely ignored in the United States. State courts' adoption of *Rylands*, which held that a non-negligent defendant could be held liable for damage caused by the unnatural use of land, foreshadowed the legal system's 20th-century acceptance of strict liability.

**Guiding Historical Question:**

**How is a government's responsibility for guaranteeing the safety and well-being of its citizens through laws and regulations balanced with the rights of an individual or organization?**

**To try to answer this question, we will examine the 1889 Johnstown Flood whose devastation was far-reaching and commanded the attention of our entire nation.**

## Primary Sources #2



Title: *The Silver Lining to the Storm-Cloud--The Charity of the Whole Nation Sustains the Loss of the Coneagh Sufferers*

Date: *PUCK*, New York, June 12, 1889

Medium: full color lithography

Persistent URL: <http://www.rarenewspapers.com/view/597766>

Puck was America's first successful humor magazine of colorful cartoon caricatures and political satire, publishing from 1871 until 1918. It was also the first to successfully adopt full color lithography printing for a weekly publication. The color prints are much desired for their display ability. This issue has as its political cartoons: front page: "*Democrats, Get Together!*", double-page centerfold: "*The Silver Lining to the Storm-Cloud--The Charity of the Whole Nation Sustains the Loss of the Coneagh Sufferers.*" which relates to the Johnstown flood.

### Primary Source #3



This cartoon from the satirical magazine Puck illustrates how the flood came to symbolize outrage at the great trusts and giant corporations that had formed in the post-Civil War period. Robber barons are shown enjoying themselves at the "high tariff dam," which is about to break on American industries below.

Image: *The Republican Monopoly Pleasure Club & Its Dangerous Dam*

Date: June 19, 1889

Medium: Lithography

Persistent URL: see below

Summary: (From the website: *Pennsylvania Mountains of Attractions*)

<http://www.pennsylvania-mountains-of-attractions.com/johnstown-flood.html>

"The cartoon was to symbolize the industrialists taking advantage of the riches at the dam and the outrage of the industrial community that was left to deal with the aftermath. The club members started donating blankets and money to the relief effort. The entire experience and outrage had a rippling effect that led into Pittsburgh and caused a steel strike. The news media had a field day with the story of the Johnstown Flood and it spread all over the country."

**Close-up of above image (Primary Source #3) from publication**



Image: *The Republican Monopoly Pleasure Club & Its Dangerous Dam*

Date: Puck Magazine, June 19, 1889

Medium: Lithograph

Persistent URL: <http://www.rarenewspapers.com/view/597767>

Puck was America's first successful humor magazine of colorful cartoon caricatures and political satire, publishing from 1871 until 1918. It was also the first to successfully adopt full color lithography printing for a weekly publication. The color prints are much desired for their display ability. This issue has as its political cartoons: *double-page centerfold: "The Republican Monopoly Pleasure Club & Its Dangerous Dam."* which relates to the Johnstown flood. (Depicts Carnegie, DePew, Frick and Pitcarin)

Henry Clay Frick led a group of speculators, including Benjamin Ruff, from Pittsburgh to purchase the abandoned reservoir, modify it, and convert it into a private resort lake for their wealthy associates. Many were connected through business and social links to Carnegie Steel. Development included lowering the dam to make its top wide enough to hold a road, and putting a fish screen in the spillway (the screen also trapped debris). These alterations are thought to have increased the vulnerability of the dam. The members built cottages and a clubhouse to create the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, an exclusive and private mountain retreat. Membership grew to include more than 50 wealthy Pittsburgh steel, coal, and railroad industrialists.

#### Primary Source #4

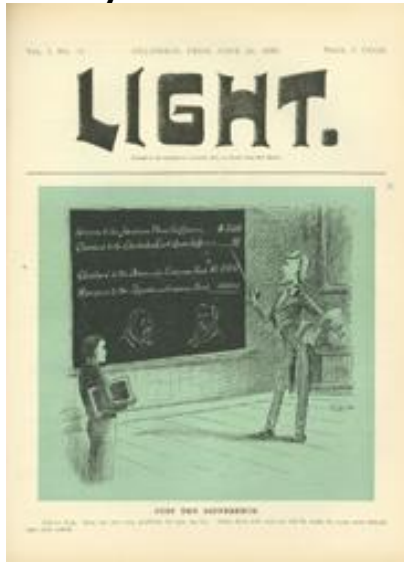


Image: *Just the Difference*

Date: June 22, 1889

Medium: Magazine Cover from *Light* (formerly Owl) published in Columbus, Ohio, Volume 1, No. 13.

Persistent URL: [http://cartoons.osu.edu/digital\\_exhibits/light/lecture.html](http://cartoons.osu.edu/digital_exhibits/light/lecture.html)

Summary: Darrow's first cover cartoon which praised Benjamin Harrison and disparaged Grover Cleveland for his response to the Johnstown Flood. Harrison gave \$300.00 to the flood sufferers and \$10.00 to the Charleston earthquake sufferers. Grover Cleveland gave \$10,000 to the Democratic campaign fund while Harrison gave zero dollars to the Republican campaign.

## Primary Source #5

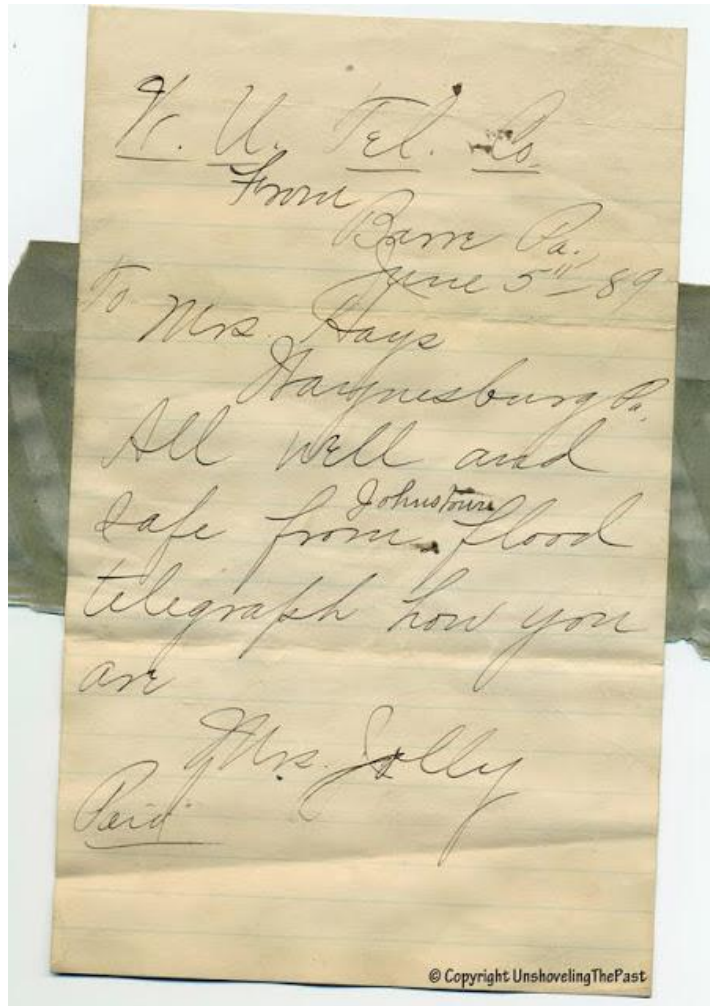


Image: To Mrs. Hays

Date: June 5, 1889

Medium: Telegram

Persistent link: <http://www.unshovelingthepast.com/2011/06/johnstown-flood-of-1889.html>

Summary: The Johnstown, Pennsylvania Flood, known as the *Great Flood of 1889* occurred on May 31, 1889 – the result of the catastrophic failure of the South Fork Dam 14 miles upstream of Johnstown, combined with many days of heavy rainfall. Over 2,000 people were killed in the flood, making it the largest U.S. disaster in the century. My great-grandparents, Adolph and Nannie Voegtly, lived in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania at the time of the flood, approximately 90 miles from Johnstown. Here's a copy of a Western Union Telegraph sent on June 5, 1889, to my great-grandmother from Mrs. Jolly Reid in Barre, PA. The text reads "To Mrs. Hays, Waynesburg, PA, All well and safe from Johnstown flood. Telegraph how you are. Mrs. Jolly Reid."



## Primary Source #6

Form No. 1.  
**THE WESTERN UNION TELEGRAPH COMPANY.**

This Company TRANSMITS and DELIVERS messages only on conditions limiting its liability, which have been assented to by the sender of the following message. Errors can be guarded against only by repeating a message back to the sending station for comparison, and the company will not hold itself liable for errors or delays in transmission or delivery of Unrepeated Messages, beyond the amount of tolls paid thereon, nor in any case where the claim is not presented in writing within sixty days after sending the message.  
This is an UNREPEATED MESSAGE, and is delivered by request of the sender, under the conditions named above.

THOS. T. ECKERT, General Manager. NORVIN GREEN, President.

NUMBER	SENT BY	RECEIVED BY	CHECK
887	NY	IN	24

Received at: *Scranton Pa* *430P* *6/5* *1889*

Dated: *June 5 1889*

By: *John Hastings*

Will you kindly see if *Mr and Mrs J W Rosensteel or J W Hallstead of Woodvale are among the dead or living and advise W. F. Hallstead*

Title: Western Union Telegram to Hastings from W.F. Hallstead

Date: June 5, 1889

Medium: Telegram to Hastings

Persistent URL:

[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/documents from 1865 - 1945/20425/johnstown flood/998883](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/documents_from_1865_-_1945/20425/johnstown_flood/998883)

## Primary Source #7



Title: Bird's-eye view of the Conemaugh Valley from Nineveh to the lake, Johnstown, Pa. : from personal sketches and surveys of the Pennsylvania R.R. by permission /

Date: 1889

Medium: map

Persistent URL: g3824j ct003257 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3824j.ct003257>

Summary: Lake Conemaugh at the club's site was 450 feet (140 m) in elevation above Johnstown. The lake was about 2 miles (3.2 km) long, approximately 1 mile (1.6 km) wide, and 60 feet (18 m) deep near the dam. The lake had a perimeter of 7 miles (11 km) to hold 20 million tons of water. The dam was 72 feet (22 m) high and 931 feet (284 m) long. The Dam was originally built by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a reservoir for the canal basin in Johnstown. It took from 1838-1853 to construct and fill, yet the canal system was obsolete by 1854. Between 1881 when the club was opened, and 1889, the dam frequently sprang leaks. It was patched, mostly with mud and straw. Additionally, a previous owner had removed and sold for scrap the three cast iron discharge pipes that previously allowed a controlled release of water. There had been some speculation as to the dam's integrity, and concerns had been raised by the head of the Cambria Iron Works downstream in Johnstown.

### Primary Source #8

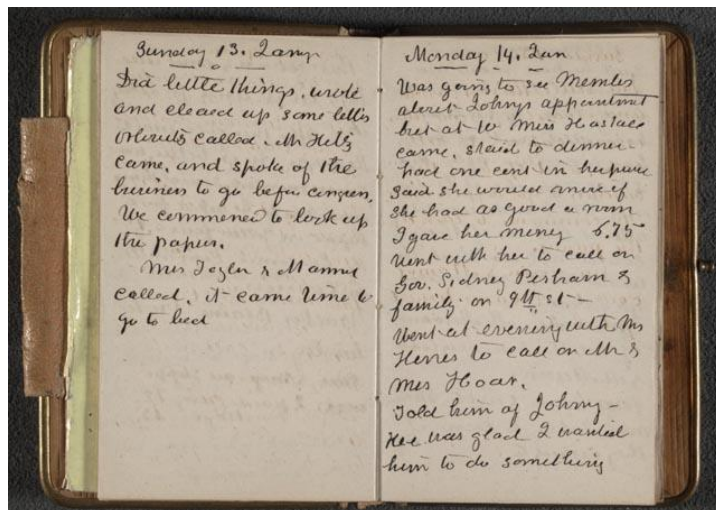


Image: Pages from Clara Barton's diary

Date: June 13 – 14, 1889

Medium: Holograph manuscript

Persistent URL: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trm011.html>

**Primary Source #9**



Title: *Pittsburg dispatch*. (Pittsburg [Pa.]),

Date: June 9, 1889.

Medium: Newspaper

*Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

Persistent URL: <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024546/1889-06-09/ed-1/seq-9/>>

Summary: Articles relate the devastation of the Johnstown Flood.

(Additional Pittsburgh Post-Gazette 1889 newspapers are available at

<http://www.pennhighlands.edu/library/digital/newspaper.htm> )

Primary Source #10



Title of image: New York Times “Hundreds of Lives Lost”

Date: May 31, 1889

Medium: Newspaper

<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/0531.html>

Summary: The paper reports on the devastation in Johnstown, PA.

Additional issues over the next few days continue to cover the events including the need for disinfectants and a plea by Dr. Lee to the Surgeon General of the United States for help. It also reports on the danger of poisoned water and that even Pittsburgh citizens were advised to boil water.

<http://www.johnstownpa.com/History/hist30.html>

### Primary Source #11



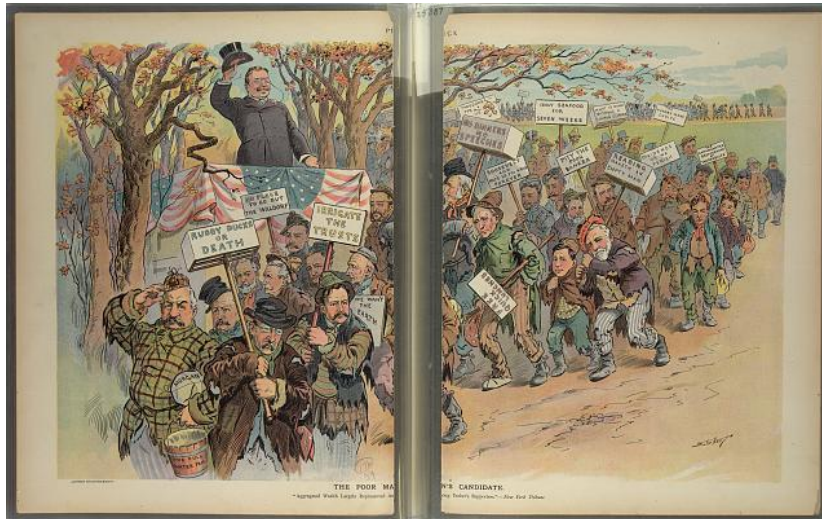
Title: Johnstown Flood, May 31st, 1889. No. 5, Geo. Hamilton, Assistant Superintendent, Cambria Iron Mills house

Creator(s): [Histed, Ernest Walter, 1862-1947](#), photographer

Date Created/Published: c1889 June 24.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008675500/>

### Primary Source #12 – Later Impact



Title: The poor man's candidate / Ehrhart.

Creator(s): [Ehrhart, S. D. \(Samuel D.\), approximately 1862-1937](#), artist

Date Created/Published: N.Y. : J. Ottmann Lith. Co., Puck Bldg., 1904 September 14.

Persistent URL : <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2011645568/>

Summary: Illustration shows President Theodore Roosevelt standing on a reviewing stand, holding hat in raised right hand as a large group of capitalists, industrialists, and financiers wearing the tattered clothing of tramps, march past the stand, some carry placards with such statements as: "Irrigate the Trusts", "No place to go but the Waldorf", "We want the earth", "Free quick lunches", "Pity the poor banker", "Dividends or we perish". At the front of the group, J.P. Morgan carries a wooden bucket labeled "The full water pail".

## Secondary Sources

1. <http://www.nps.gov/jofl/historyculture/stories.htm>

Use this link to read about the statements of employees of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, and others in reference to the disaster to the passenger trains at Johnstown, taken by John H. Hampton, at his office in Pittsburgh, by request of Superintendent Robert Pitcarin, beginning July 15th, 1889.

The object of this investigation was to determine whether the Company is liable in law for the loss of the lives, or property of passengers, and put into proper form a defence to any actions that may be brought against the Company for damages.

2. Read chapter 12 "The Town Counts Its Blessings" from Richard O'Connor's *Johnstown: The Day the Dam Broke*, or Chapter 9 "Our Misery Is the Work of Man" from David McCullough's *The Johnstown Flood*.
3. Explore the Johnstown Area Heritage Association's documentation of relief efforts including the Red Cross. <http://www.jaha.org/FloodMuseum/response.html>
4. Discover further information by skimming *A History of Johnstown and the Great Flood: A Study of Disaster and Rehabilitation* a dissertation written Nathan Daniel Shappee in 1940 for the University of Pittsburgh's PHD program. Chapter 7 "The Relief of Johnstown" and Chapter 8 "Everybody's Flood". (PA Digital Repository) <http://www.accesspdr.org/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/acacc-itf&CISOPTR=1036&REC=1>

5. Use the following links to discover the legislative action and response to the Johnstown Flood.

Ryland vs Fletcher explanation

<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080603120728AApBd5M>

Yale Law Journal

<http://www.yalelawjournal.org/pdf/110-2/shugermanNEW.pdf>

## Additional Secondary Resources:

Gilman, Rebecca. *A True History of the Johnstown Flood*. Directed by Robert Falls. 2009.

The "Great Johnstown Flood May 31, 1889." Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Web. 2013

Johnstown Flood Museum. *The Compelling Story of the 1889 Disaster: The South Fork Fishing & Hunting Club and the South Fork Dam*. Web. 2013.

<http://www.jaha.org/FloodMuseum/clubanddam.html>.

“Mighty Mouse and the Johnstown Flood.” Mighty Mouse Theatrical Cartoon Series. TerryTown Cartoons. Distributed by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1946. YouTube. <http://youtu.be/ezyyBZ1bfbE>.

Tip:

<http://blogs.loc.gov/picturethis/2012/12/puck-cartoons-launched-at-last/>

PUCK cartoons <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=ap101.p7&st=grid>

**Graphic Organizers:** List the SCIM-C charts from Appendices 4, 5, and 6 or Library of Congress [analyzing tools](#) that you want your students to use to interpret these primary sources.

**Chart number one**

**Analyzing Political Cartoons**

[http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing Political  
I\\_Cartoons.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Political_Cartoons.pdf)

**Primary Source Analysis Tool**

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/primary-source-analysis-tool/>