The Great Flood of 1937

This January marks the seventieth anniversary of the worst natural disaster in the history of the Ohio Valley. Heavy rains in early 1937 led to extensive flooding along the Ohio River and numerous tributaries. Although hundreds of communities suffered, the Great Flood of 1937 struck particularly hard in Cincinnati and Louisville.

In Cincinnati, the river stayed above flood stage from January 18 until February 5 and reached its crest of 79.99 feet on Tuesday, January 26. Schools, stores, theaters and factories closed. Authorities rationed electricity, suspended streetcar service, and shut off the water supply except for four hours daily. In Louisville, the Ohio stayed above flood stage for twenty-three days. On January 27, the river crested at 57.1 feet, almost thirty feet above flood stage. More than 60 percent of the city was under water and about 230,000 of Louisville's 350,000 residents had to evacuate their homes. Property damage exceeded fifty million dollars.

The flood resulted from unprecedented January rain throughout the region. January 1937 was the wettest month in Ohio since 1866 with a state average of 9.57 inches. Normal January precipitation is two to three inches. The highest Ohio rainfall was 14.88 inches in Fernbank, just west of Cincinnati, but rainfall in Louisville surpassed even that total. Louisville's January precipitation was a record 19.17 inches.

Both The Filson Historical Society and Cincinnati Museum Center have extensive collections that document this disaster, including photographs, books, pamphlets, maps, diaries, reports, newspapers, and correspondence. As you look at the illustrations presented here, keep in mind the scale of this disaster.

The Jan. 25, 1937 Cincinnati Enquirer notified its readers that "the City Manager officially declares that an emergency exists in Cincinnati and it is absolutely essential that all citizens cooperate with public and private agencies to conserve all of the community's resources." CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER, CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY

The Great Flood of 1937

Collections Essay

This January marks the seventieth anniversary of the worst natural disaster in the history of the Ohio Valley. Heavy rains in early 1937 led to extensive flooding along the Ohio River and numerous tributaries. Although hundreds of communities suffered, the Great Flood of 1937 struck particularly hard in Cincinnati and Louisville.

In Cincinnati, the river stayed above flood stage from January 18 until February 5 and reached its crest of 79.99 feet on Tuesday, January 26. Schools, stores, theaters and factories closed. Authorities rationed electricity, suspended streetcar service, and shut off the water supply except for four hours daily. In Louisville, the Ohio stayed above flood stage for twenty-three days. On January 27, the river crested at 57.1 feet, almost thirty feet above flood stage. More than 60 percent of the city was under water and about 230,000 of Louisville's 350,000 residents had to evacuate their homes. Property damage exceeded fifty million dollars.

The flood resulted from unprecedented January rain throughout the region. January 1937 was the wettest month in Ohio since 1866 with a state average of 9.57 inches. Normal January precipitation is two to three inches. The highest Ohio rainfall was 14.88 inches in Fernbank, just west of Cincinnati, but rainfall in Louisville surpassed even that total. Louisville's January precipitation was a record 19.17 inches.

Both The Filson Historical Society and Cincinnati Museum Center have extensive collections that document this disaster, including photographs, books, pamphlets, maps, diaries, reports, newspapers, and correspondence. As you look at the illustrations presented here, keep in mind the scale of this disaster.

RIGHT: Up a pole at third and River Road in Louisville. WHAS radio announcers Foster Brooks (the future comedian) and Pete Monroe reporting on flood conditions over shortwave radio. Radio was the voice of the emergency, with regular updates, reports, emergency calls, etc. An NBC broadcast over WAVE radio on Feb. 7, 1937, proclaimed radio as the "tenacious horseman that rides the crest of the flood from the headwaters of the Ohio to the mouth of the mighty Mississippi."

THE FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

OHIO VALLEY HISTORY
This map showing the flooded areas of Louisville was part of a certificate of appreciation that Mayor Neville Miller presented to volunteers. It illustrates the extent of the flooding, as well as the surprising areas near the river that were high enough to avoid inundation. THE FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Houses on Shelby Street in Louisville's eastern downtown area awash in flood waters.
THE FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Copy for a Jan. 22, 1937, WAVE radio broadcast over the NBC network proclaiming Louisville to be a “dark city” that night, with its lights out and streets deserted. THE FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

This aerial view of the Cane Run area in western Louisville, bordering the river, looks like a huge lake—except for the buildings and trees dotting its surface. THE FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Thirty-fifth and Rudd Streets in the Portland neighborhood of Louisville. The flood devastated Portland and other neighborhoods in western Louisville. Almost that entire area of the city and county were under water. THE FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Bystanders on Cincinnati's Ludlow Avenue viaduct looked almost hopeless as the water level reached 79.99 feet on Jan. 26, 1937. CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER, CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY

A gondola it's not, but this man seemed to be poling his little craft quite successfully in the 1700 block of South Third Street in the Old Louisville neighborhood south of downtown. Just four blocks from The Filson's current location, this is more than two and a half miles from the river. THE FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In this well-remembered view of the Abraham Lincoln statue outside the Louisville Free Public Library at Third and York Streets, "Father Abraham" appears to be walking—or at least standing—on water. THE FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ABOVE: After the floodwaters receded, evidence of the incredible force of the water was everywhere. In Lawrenceburg, Indiana, a house was turned upside down.

LEFT: Fire struck in Cincinnati during the flood and burned houses to the water line.

BOTTOM LEFT: In one Cincinnati neighborhood, a garage ended up stuck between two houses at the second story. CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER, CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY

RIGHT: A quarantine pass dated Feb. 2, 1937, issued to Sidney Pierce, allowing him to cross the quarantine line officials had established in order to better manage the disaster and control the spread of possible diseases expected in the wake of the flood. Management was effective and there were few problems with disease. THE FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Bill Russell, a photographer for the Cincinnati Times Star, climbed a pole to photograph the flood in Cumminsville, along the Mill Creek.

Chicago Did It! San Francisco Did It!

Now Watch Louisville!

Fire! Fire! Fire! Chicago in 1871 was a blazing inferno! Within a few short days almost the entire city of Chicago was a barren waste of charred timbers and smoking ashes. But was Chicago really destroyed? No, only the buildings! Men and women make a city...not buildings. Those Chicago men and women laughed in the face of disaster! They rolled up their sleeves and went to work. On the cold ashes of their old Chicago they built a greater Chicago...the second largest city in America!

Earthquake! Earthquake! Wide-eyed with terror the citizens of San Francisco rushed from their homes. The world seemed coming to an end! Buildings crumbled and crashed about them! Fire lashed its hungry tongue on every side! Mad, stark horror stalked the trembling streets! In 1906 the entire city of San Francisco was in ruins. But was San Francisco really destroyed? No, only the buildings! Men and women make a city...not buildings. The pioneer spirit which had built San Francisco could not be shaken even by an earth quake! The citizens of San Francisco rolled up their sleeves and went to work. Over the ruins of their old San Francisco they built a greater San Francisco...the greatest city in the West!

Chicago did it! San Francisco did it! Now watch LOUISVILLE! The disaster which has befallen us is small compared to the Chicago Fire...it is small compared to the San Francisco Earthquake.

The Federal Government has appropriated seven hundred and ninety million dollars for flood relief! The United States Army has come to help us. The great American Red Cross has placed its entire organization in our service. The whole nation is giving us every possible assistance. We have at our command every modern method for building a better and a greater city. Now, watch LOUISVILLE!

The eighty-eight person Cincinnati long distance office with every position filled.
The river stage was 72.8 feet on Saturday, January 23 when this photograph was taken in downtown Cincinnati on Broadway Street, looking north to Third. The river would rise another 7.1 feet.

Even in the worst disasters, people will find some diversions.

Cincinnatians were rescued by every means possible—this woman was carried from her home near Freeman and Eighth St. in the West End.

Winter 2006
The flood essentially washed away Shippingport, the little town on the island between the Louisville and Portland Canal and the Ohio River, and between downtown and Portland. Its few remaining residents were relocated and the remnants of the town razed. The floodwaters rose, relief efforts in Louisville were organized. Issued on Jan. 26, 1937, "Relief Bulletin No. 1" listed sites, personnel, and telephone numbers of emergency services for the Crescent Hill area. Located east of downtown Louisville, Crescent Hill's higher elevation largely spared it serious flooding. It became an important staging and relief area.

Oil and gasoline tank wagons, milk tank trucks, and even cement trucks delivered water. Cleveland sent water trucks to Cincinnati to help with water distribution.

Federal agencies like the Works Progress Administration provided important flood relief assistance by setting up soup kitchens and other services.
ABOVE: The Point neighborhood, along the river just upstream of downtown Louisville, was essentially destroyed by the flood. The George Fitz family were refugees from the Point and took up temporary quarters in one of the city’s refugee camps. THE FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BELOW: This aerial view looking north to the Ohio River shows the devastating flooding in Louisville’s west end. Block after block of houses and businesses were evacuated as the waters rose and spread farther and farther until more than 60 percent of the city had been inundated and some 65 percent of its population evacuated. THE FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
In his book on the flood, the noted journalist Lowell Thomas praised Cincinnati City Manager Clarence A. Dykstra for maintaining order in the city. He noted that “Officials from Washington, reporters from New York and Chicago went to Cincinnati during its darkest hours. They marveled to find a smooth, unruffled machinery moving without a hitch to cope with that stupendous emergency. The answer, everybody agreed, was Dykstra.”


Numerous publications appeared after the flood. This particular “Photo Story” could be mailed for one and a half cents if no writing was added to the inside. CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER, CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY

Anita Brooke’s Jan. 26, 1937 letter describes her flood experience up to that time. Her apartment in the Old Louisville neighborhood was just blocks away from the man afloat on his makeshift raft on Third Street. THE FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Dear Folks:

By this time you surely must have heard a lot about the horrible flood. You can be thankful you are away from Cincinnati now for it is a nightmare. The river is up to the third step on our front porch and extends about half-way back in our side yard. Our cellar is flooded and our only means of escape is out the back way and up over the back streets to Elheron Avenue.

The roar of the water is something we will never forget. We saw houses lift from their foundations and rush downstream, and we even saw a factory topple over and float away. Yesterday I was looking out of the window and our telephone poles fell over, dragging the wires with them. My mother saw two men disappear out in midstream in a skiff, and houses and furniture and everything imaginable drifts by. You simply cannot imagine the horror of this flood. The constant roar of water passing the house and hitting it and the drift coming downstream and passing so close to the house have been keeping us in a constant state of worry. However, I believe the worst is over and now that the river is falling we feel very much reassured.

Cincinnatian Alma Budd described the flood in a letter she wrote on Jan. 28, 1937 to Herbert F. Koch, executive vice president of the Cincinnati Morris Plan Bank and her boss. CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER, CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY

The Boy Scouts of Cincinnati worked hard during the emergency. Their annual report described the assistance they provided. CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER, CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY