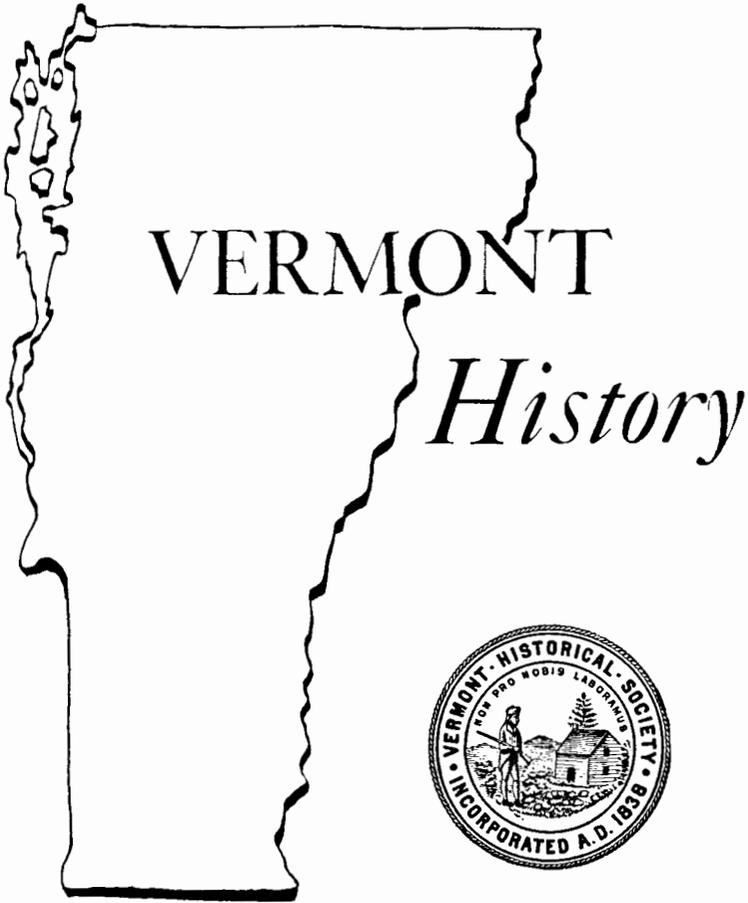


FALL 1977

Vol. 45, No. 4



The PROCEEDINGS of the
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



“It was a fantastic and horrible sight — deep washouts, thick slimy mud everywhere and buildings overturned and sometimes upside down or crushed. Dead cattle and other animals were lying in the fields and along the sides of what had been the highway.”

Recollections of The Vermont Flood of November, 1927

By A. BRADLEY SOULE, M.D.

According to a contemporary report published by R. E. Atwood of Burlington with a preface by Governor John E. Weeks, the great flood of 1927 was the worst disaster in the history of Vermont.¹ I believe that this statement is undoubtedly true.

F. E. Hartwell, meteorologist of the United States Weather Bureau in Burlington at the time said “Consideration must be given to the fact that October of 1927 was a wet month in Vermont. The total rainfall was about fifty percent above normal and well distributed throughout the four week period. Consequently, the ground became so soaked with water that by the end of the month all rainfall was running off as surface water with practically none entering the ground. This culminated in three days of exceedingly heavy rain on November 2, 3 and 4, with more than eight inches of water falling during those three days. During this time, the rain over much of the state flowed immediately into the river systems without the retarding process of first soaking into the ground and running off more gradually as would have been the case if the rain had followed a dry month instead of a wet one.” Hartwell estimated that nearly two billion cubic feet of water fell during those three days. The water, flowing into the narrow, low valleys in a short period of time, caused a flood which probably will not happen again because of control measures taken after the disaster.

The Winooski River valley suffered the most although all rivers in Vermont were torrential, especially the Mississquoi, Lamoille and White Rivers, and also the Connecticut. The greatest flood damage was in Vermont, although the rains also produced extensive damage in New Hampshire and Massachusetts.²

In Montpelier, the water crested twelve feet above the street level on Main and State Streets.³ Other cities and towns experienced similar flooding. In Waterbury most of the inhabitants in the lower-lying portions of the village took refuge in the upper stories of their homes until they could be rescued by boats. Others managed to get to the high school building, the tavern and the Waterbury Inn. At the Vermont State Hospital, the patients were taken to the upper floors; it was my understanding that they were not in a state of panic but met the situation calmly, and no casualties were reported.

At the time, I was a senior medical student living and working at the Mary Fletcher Hospital in Burlington as a junior intern. On Friday morning, November 4, at about the height of the flood, a call was received at the hospital requesting that a doctor be sent immediately to revive a patient who lived near the summit of French Hill, overlooking the Winooski valley east of Williston village. Dr. Paul K. French, then a young internist, answered the call and invited me to accompany him.

Arriving at the patient's house, we discovered a woman had awakened in the morning and looked out over the valley which was completely covered with water up to the level of the second stories of the farmhouses. She promptly fainted. By the time we arrived, she had recovered, and nothing needed to be done for her.

The sight was truly appalling! Water filled the entire valley and extended up onto the foothills on either side. Several row boats were on this new lake rescuing people from second-story windows. Dead cattle floated on the water.

Later on the same day, knowing that enormous quantities of water were rushing through the Winooski River at the foot of Colchester Avenue, I walked to the top of the hill beyond Green Mountain Cemetery and watched the water roaring down the river to the level of the iron bridge joining Burlington and Winooski. Obviously, the two-part bridge was seriously threatened. A warehouse on the Burlington side, built close to the water seemed to be confining the stream and thus imperiling the bridge, was destroyed by dynamite but to no avail. After watching for an hour or so, I turned to go back to the hospital when there was a great shout from the crowd; and by the time I had turned around, the bridge was gone and out of sight.

The same thing was apparently happening to most of the major bridges in Vermont. It was later determined that 1,258 bridges were destroyed in this disastrous flood. Telephone and telegraph wires were down and communications with Montpelier, Barre and many of the other towns in the center of the state were cut off. No one knew for certain what was happening, but rumors were rife that people were dying like flies in Montpelier and Barre. We later learned that the small village of Bolton was practically wiped out.

The Agan family who lived on the bank of Joyner Brook, a branch of the Winooski, heard the home of their neighbor bumping down the flooded highway past their house at about 2:30 in the morning. The owner, John May, was peering out of a second story window, holding a lantern. He called out, "Where am I?"

"You're at Agan's," came the reply.

"This is Jack May. We're gone! Goodbye!" and he was gone.

May and his wife and three children all drowned in the raging river. A boarding house operated by Mrs. Lawrence Hayes was also picked up and destroyed by the torrential waters. A dozen or more persons in the house all drowned. The final casualty list noted about eighty-four deaths in the state, with the largest number in Bolton.⁴

A group of concerned citizens in Burlington, headed by Dr. Clarence H. Beecher, Mayor of the city and also Professor of Medicine at the College of Medicine of the University of Vermont, decided that a relief expedition should be organized to bring aid to Montpelier. Dr. Thomas S. Brown, Superintendent of the Mary Fletcher Hospital and Professor of Anatomy at the College of Medicine, organized the expedition, assisted by Edward W. Mudgett, an insurance agent from Essex Junction. About one hundred men took part; approximately half were physicians and medical students, the remainder being volunteer truck drivers and others.

We gathered about six o'clock in the evening on Saturday, or possibly on Sunday; I cannot remember exactly. Our rallying point was Fort Ethan Allen, which we reached by crossing the Lime Kiln Bridge near St. Michael's College. There were about thirty or forty small Ford and Chevrolet pick-up trucks. We took with us only things that could be carried on our backs or in our arms, such as typhoid vaccine, morphine, yeast cakes and liquor, most of which reached its destination. The reason for the yeast cakes was that we had heard that there was a shortage of bread, as I believe there was. The committee in charge had been able to get in touch with a few men in Waterbury Center area who agreed to act as guides. We carried flashlights since the entire expedition was conducted in darkness. By the time we took off, the rain had subsided and the flooded rivers were going down rapidly.

Because most of the bridges had been destroyed, we had to take a rather circuitous route. We drove through Essex Junction, Essex Center, Jericho, Underhill Center, Pleasant Valley and Jeffersonville. From there we went through Smugglers' Notch into Stowe and then on to Waterbury Center. Here our guides met us and led us up an old wood road as far as we could drive. I am uncertain as to exactly where we went from this point, but my recollection is that we left our cars near the foot of Middlesex Mountain. We then hiked through Middlesex Notch. The traveling was most difficult for the

nearly one hundred men — most of whom were young but some of whom were in their forties and fifties, and almost all unaccustomed to such arduous travel. I vividly recall that near the top of the Notch, Dr. Erald Foster, an intern from the hospital, suffered a mild heart attack and was given an injection by Dr. Frederick S. Kent, who had brought a medical kit with him. Erald, only about twenty-five years old, had to keep going, of course, and with help from the rest of us, finally completed the journey.

As dawn broke, we came to the first farmhouse on the Montpelier side of the mountain. Ed Mudgett rapped on the door and roused the woman of the house — a slatternly type. An old Model T Ford sat in the yard, and Ed rather peremptorily told the lady that we were a relief expedition heading for Montpelier and needed to requisition the car. She replied, "Well, you'll have to speak to the nigger out in the barn doing the chores because it belongs to him. I don't think he'll let you have it."

Ed went to the barn and routed out the hired man, who raised objections to their taking the car, but they took it nonetheless. The road down the hill was filled with boulders and mud. The last I saw of the car was with Ed driving it and eight or ten people in or on it and the owner running along behind. By that time we were so exhausted that we could only sit there and laugh hysterically until we got our breaths. Finally, we dragged ourselves to our feet clutching the yeast cakes and vaccine, and eventually we arrived in Montpelier.

Here we found everyone busy and apparently well. They were surprised to see us and obviously pleased that efforts were being made to bring them some help. Contrary to our expectations, we learned that only one person had drowned in Montpelier, though in Barre the Lieutenant Governor of the state, S. Hollister Jackson, and a number of other people had lost their lives. Everyone was busy trying to clean up now that the waters had ebbed. However, they were short of food and tactfully suggested that the best thing we could do was to go back home. Many of us from the hospital agreed that in our physical condition we could never make the trip back up over the mountain. Fortunately for us, several of the doctors at the Heaton Hospital in Montpelier arranged that we be taken by car as far as possible along Route 2. This wasn't far because not only had the bridges washed out but the culverts as well, which meant that we had to walk most of the way back to Waterbury and later to beyond Waterbury Center to our car.

It was a fantastic and horrible sight — deep washouts, thick slimy mud everywhere and buildings overturned and sometimes upside down or crushed. Dead cattle and other animals were lying in the fields and along the sides of what had been the highway. About halfway from Middlesex to Waterbury, we went past what was known as "Slip Hill" where we could see the rails and ties of the

Central Vermont Railroad suspended in air for a distance of a hundred feet or more.

When we reached Waterbury Village, the main street was a morass with thick slimy gray mud through which we waded up to our knees. Relief headquarters had been established in the Congregational Church at the junction of Main Street and the road to Stowe. Food was being served there to anybody who needed it, which was practically everyone. Realizing their shortages, we were reluctant to share in the bounty, which consisted mainly of baked beans, but we had had nothing to eat since the night before, and so we did, of course. At that time it was decided that about twenty of the group should stay to help clean up the village, and we drew lots. I was among the seventy or eighty who were told to go home, so we slogged along back to Waterbury Center and then up the wood road to our cars. Then completely bushed, we started back.

Snow was falling, and when we got to the foot of the hill leading to Smugglers' Notch, a woman came rushing out of a house shouting "Don't try to make it. It's slippery and if you get off the road, they'll push your car into the ditch because they've got to keep the highway clear!" We were too exhausted to argue, so on we went. As we neared the top of the Notch, it was slippery and three of us got out and helped to push the car over the steepest portion. So, by the grace of God and what little energy we and the car had, we managed to get through. By the time we got back to the hospital, we were hungry, worn out and frustrated because we felt we had accomplished virtually nothing. At least we did deliver the yeast cakes, vaccine, morphine and some of the liquor! I weighed myself and found I had lost over ten pounds in a very little over twenty-four hours. Thus ended my own experiences with the flood.

Later, we heard about some of the students who had stayed in Waterbury. One incident involved several freshman medics who were with a group asked to clean out the Roman Catholic Church. In the basement they came upon a case of communion wine which they sampled liberally. In the main body of the church they uncovered a statue which had been washed by the flood from its niche onto the floor of the building. The boys, somewhat the worse for wear from the effects of the wine, cleaned up the statue and moved it about twenty feet so that it faced the tabernacle at the foot of the main altar. Later, when some of the parishioners returned, they were amazed to find the statue moved to this conspicuous place. This was never officially claimed as a "miracle," probably because the church authorities sensed what had really happened. However, it was described, complete with photographs, as a "mysterious occurrence" in the booklet, *When the Water Came to Waterbury*.⁵

Except for this episode, the boys worked long and hard. Soon, large groups of volunteers came from the University of Vermont, Middlebury College, and Norwich University to the flooded areas

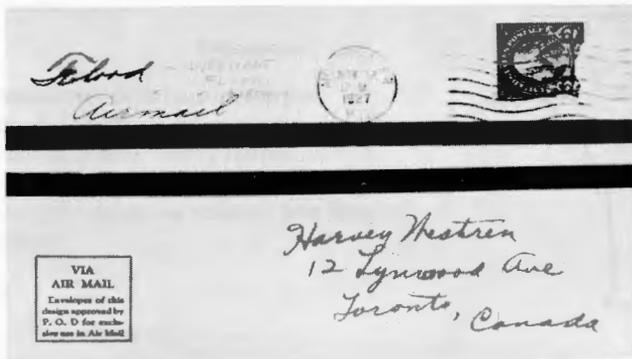


Interior view of St. Andrew's Roman Catholic Church, Waterbury, Vermont. "The only statute left upright" was judged a "remarkable incident". When The Water Came to Waterbury, Wilbur Collection, Bailey Library, University of Vermont.

to help in the cleanup. One of the most distasteful features was burying the hundreds of cattle which had drowned.⁶ President Coolidge sent Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce, to visit the state and to assess the damage, which was later estimated as in excess of \$25 million in property loss.

The Army Corps of Engineers was called upon, and eight days after the highway bridge went out between Winooski and Burlington a pontoon bridge had been constructed by the engineers using fifteen boats over which was built a plank highway. Several weeks later the water again rose, and ten of the fifteen boats were lost. They were soon replaced, but long term recovery and rehabilitation followed slowly with construction of new bridges, highways, houses, and barns. The Central Vermont Railroad was back in operation within ninety-two days after almost superhuman efforts. It was my impression that some communities never fully recovered economically from the disastrous effects of the flood. Federal aid was supplemented by grants from the American Red Cross, but most of the rehabilitation was accomplished by the people of the state through their government and by their own efforts and resources.

Throughout the period of the flood and its aftermath, the old side-wheeler "Chateaugay" worked day and night carrying food and mail, express and materials for reconstruction from Port Kent to Burlington since all other transportation systems into most parts of Vermont were at a standstill.



Emergency Vermont Flood Airmail, November 22, 1927.
Collection of Richard Valley, Winooski, Vermont.

The widespread damage to railroads and highways disrupted all regular mail services within the state. The Postal Service established what became known as the Vermont Emergency Flood Airmail Service within a few days after the waters had subsided. Lieutenant R. S. Fogg, flying a small plane between the Montpelier-Barre Airport and Concord, New Hampshire, transported all the first class mail that entered or left including what could be sent in from surrounding areas such as Waterbury, Morrisville, or Plainfield.⁷ This one plane functioned until regular highway and rail service could be restored. The regular air mail rate of ten cents was suspended during the emergency and mail travelled at the surface rate of two cents.

The preventative measures taken after 1927 should keep floods from stopping the surface mail again, and with luck, Vermont will never again experience a disaster of the magnitude of the Great Flood of 1927.

NOTES

¹R. E. Atwood, comp., *Stories and Pictures of the Vermont Flood — November 1927* (Burlington: Burlington Free Press, undated).

²*Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, Vermont), 4 November 1927.

³Joseph G. Abair, *The Flood*, Nov. 3, 4, 1927, Montpelier, Vt. (Montpelier, Vermont: Capital City Press, 1928).

⁴David Ludlum "The Vermont Flood of 1927," in David Ludlum and others, eds., *The Country Journal New England Weather Book* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976).

⁵Lloyd E. Squier, ed., *When the Water Came to Waterbury, November 3rd and 4th, 1927* (Waterbury, Vermont: The Record Print, 1928).

⁶Charles T. Walter, *Lights and Shadows of the Flood of 1927. Vermont at Its Worst; VermonTERS at their Best* (St. Johnsbury, Vermont: Cowles Press, Inc., 1928).

⁷George C. Slawson, Arthur W. Bingham, and Sprague W. Drenan, "The Postal History of Vermont," *Collectors Club Handbook*, No. 21, pp. 304-305.