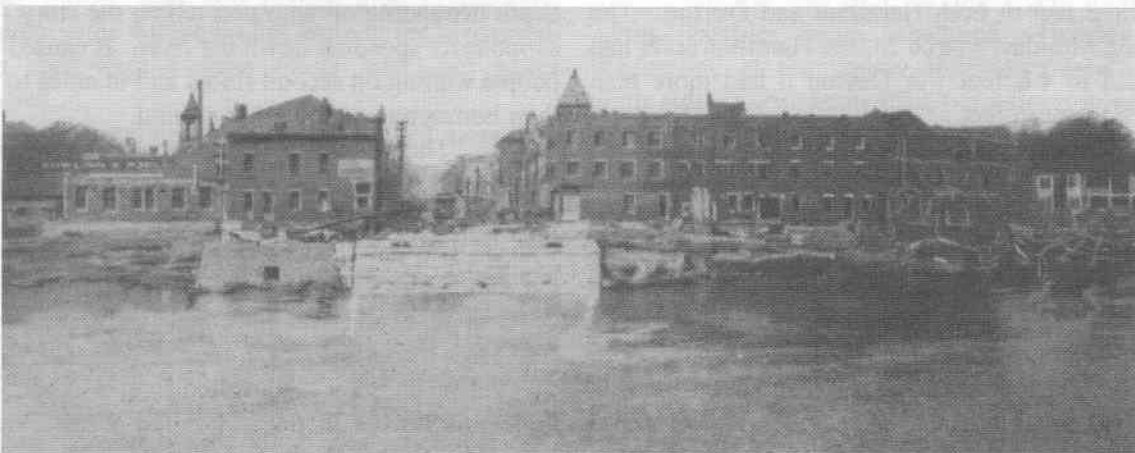




Hundreds of spectators were drawn to the banks of the Great Miami River as Hamilton's four bridges were threatened by the force of the river and tons of floating wreckage. Three spans fell within two hours -- the Black Street Bridge at 12:12 p.m. Tuesday, the High-Main Bridge at 12:28 p.m. and the railroad bridge at 2:12 p.m. The Columbia Bridge, at the south end of Hamilton, tumbled into the river at 2 a.m. Wednesday, as the river reached its official peak of 34.6 feet in Hamilton.

In the top photo by C. S. Jacobi, bystanders take flight as the single span High-Main iron truss bridge begins to fold. Below, in a photo taken after the water had receded, only the western abutment remains of "the longest single span bridge in the nation."



'Run for the hills! Wall of water rushing down river!'

Stubborn rumor may have saved thousands of lives during crisis

A rumor circulating through Hamilton the morning of Tuesday, March 25, 1913, saved hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives. Believers survived; many skeptics died. If other people had reacted to the baseless story, it's likely that the city death toll would not have exceeded 200 during the next few days.

About an hour after classes had started, a warning reached Hamilton school leaders from a source in Dayton, Ohio, also located along the restless Great Miami River.

That alarm said a dam had broken at Dayton, about 35 miles northeast of Hamilton, and a surge of water was rushing down the river.

In 1913, there were no radio or television stations to confirm or deny the statement. Weather warning radios were several decades in the future.

There were telephone and telegraph communications, but most local connections had been lost by that dreary morning. Rising streams and rivers had inundated roads, washing out poles and snapping lines. Railroad and interurban travel also had been disrupted as track and bridges were undermined or under water.

In previous hours, about 10 to 11 inches of rain had drenched the area. The Great Miami River and its tributaries were out of their banks.

On Easter, March 23, the river's depth had been three feet in both Hamilton and Dayton. The next day, Monday, March 24, the Hamilton level had increased to 4.8 feet. In Dayton it had more than doubled to seven feet.

Those facts -- plus the false report of the Dayton dam collapse and similar scares -- caused Hamilton educators to close schools and order the pupils to return to their residences.

Fortunately, there was no school busing in the city in 1913. Students walked. And that day, as they walked home, children repeated the dam rumor to adults they encountered on the streets and in businesses and industries. The adults, in turn, spread the story to family, friends and co-workers. Soon

there was an exodus of employees from offices, stores and factories in the city.

Those believing the story rushed home to encourage family members to move to higher ground east and west of the river. "Run for the hills!" was a familiar cry that morning and early afternoon.

No dam had collapsed, and there wasn't a "wall of water rushing down the river," as some recalled the report saying.

But there was immediate danger. The river had never risen as fast as it did that morning. By 11 a.m., the Great Miami in Hamilton had reached 24.3 feet, topping the record set during a March 1898 flood. By that hour it also had put the municipal electric generating plant out of operation.

At 12:12 p.m., as hundreds of people watched, the surge of water and debris destroyed the Black Street Bridge, opposite the Champion paper mill. A few moments later, the High-Main Street Bridge collapsed. At 2:12 p.m., the railroad bridge toppled into the turbulent Great Miami.

The Columbia Bridge at the south end of town held until 2 a.m. Wednesday, March 26 -- about the time the river officially reached its record high of 34.6 feet in Hamilton.

During the night of March 25-26, another rumor, similar to the earlier one, swept through the community. A wave from 20 to 40 feet high -- its depth depending on who was telling the story -- was supposedly speeding down the river. It caused some people waiting on second floors and in attics to leave their homes and go to higher ground.

"The people were all nervous and excited," the Journal reported later, "and were ready to believe anything."

The newspaper said "Wednesday afternoon the same scare spread through part of the East Side," causing an exodus to the county infirmary on the East High Street hill.

Wednesday the swollen river was said to be three miles wide in the city. The water extended from present Erie Highway (Ohio 4) on the east to C

March 24, 1913, headline:
***Fifteen years ago
today Hamilton
was flooded city***

The brief story brought back dire memories to many Hamiltonians who read the front page of the Republican-News the afternoon and evening of Monday, March 24, 1913. Within a few hours, the event it described would seem meek in comparison.

"Fifteen years ago today, March 24, 1898," the anonymous writer recalled, "the Miami River reached the greatest flood height in its history, 23 feet and 9 inches, 19 inches higher than the great flood of 1866, which carried away the old covered bridge at High and Main streets and worse than the historic floods of 1805 and 1846."

"It was by far the worst flood ever experienced in this city," the article said. "The rise in the river from 5 until 7 o'clock p.m. On March 23 was phenomenal, and the water continued to

advance until 3 o'clock a.m. On March 24 when it reached its maximum point and thereafter slowly receded, leaving a trail of death and disaster in its wake."

By Tuesday, March 22, 1898, rain had been soaking Hamilton for a week. A thunderstorm that day caused flash floods and washed out railroad tracks. About 500 people were evacuated from low areas in the city overnight as the Great Miami rose an average of 2.5 feet an hour. Some parts of the city of about 23,000 people were flooded by dawn Wednesday, March 23.

The river peaked at just under 24 feet at 3 a.m. Thursday, March 24, 1898. The flood claimed seven lives in Hamilton. Four other were reported missing. The homes of more than 170 families were destroyed or heavily damaged.

The writer recollecting the 1898 flood ended with a notation on the developing situation.

"From the heavy rains of yesterday, last night and Monday, the river is again rising rapidly and bids fair to reach the danger stage," the reporter speculated on the eve of the county's greatest disaster.

and D streets on the west. Later, engineers measured its depth at more than 43 feet at several locations, including at the intersection of Vine and North Seventh streets.

Much of the Midwest was flooded in the last full week of March 1913. In Ohio, 94 towns listed millions of dollars in damage and 367 deaths.

Hamilton was the hardest hit in terms of loss of life. More than 200 people died in the city, including some whose bodies were never recovered. There also were victims found later, but never identified.

Hamilton property losses included more than 300 houses destroyed and 2,000 so severely damaged they had to be demolished. In addition, many businesses, factories, schools, churches and institutions were destroyed or damaged.

The flood left more than 10,000 people homeless in a city that had 35,279 inhabitants in the 1910 census. After the water receded, health problems created by the flood claimed about 100 more lives in Hamilton.

Unknown is how many Hamiltonians would have died March 25-26, 1913, if someone hadn't started the baseless rumor of a dam breaking somewhere north of the city.

According to newspaper reports, it is obvious that many people heeded the advice to "head to the hills."

On the east side of the river, more than 2,500 people were sheltered Tuesday and Wednesday at the county Infirmary, then on the north side of Princeton Pike (an extension of High Street) on what was known as Poor House Hill.

"The main building, as well as the barns and cattle sheds, were filled with people driven from their homes," the Journal said.

On the West Side, hundreds of people found refuge at the Hamilton Country Club, located on Wilson's Hill (later Washington Blvd.). The club was west of the Butler County Children's Home on South D Street, and south of Millikin Street.

Telegraph line outage was factor in longevity of 'wall of water' rumor

The rumor of a dam break north of Hamilton refused to die during the first 24 hours of the flood, in part because of the disruption of the telegraph system. In April, as recovery began, reporters had some success in trying to trace the origin of the false stories.

They verified there was no dam failure between Hamilton and Dayton, despite early reports. There was no large dam on the river. Instead, the "wall of water" rushing down the Great Miami River was supposed to have burst from the Lewiston Reservoir (now known as Indian Lake), one of three reservoirs that impounded water for the Miami-Erie Canal. (See map on page 11.)

Reporters discovered there hadn't been a break in the 13,000-acre reservoir in Logan County, about 100 miles north of Hamilton.

An errant warning meant for Hamilton didn't arrive early Tuesday morning because telegraph lines had been washed out.

Instead, it was diverted to McGonigle in Hanover Township, about eight miles west of the Hamilton depot on what was then the Cincinnati, Hamilton & Indianapolis Railroad (now part of CSX). It was sent to the McGonigle telegraph office with the expectation that it would be relayed to Hamilton.

After forwarding the alert, the operator left the message on his desk, where it was found by the man who relieved him. Believing it hadn't been sent -- and finding the telegraph lines down into the city -- the McGonigle night operator came to Hamilton's West Side to spread the alarm about 12 hours after the first warning.

Accounts vary on how the operator reached the city that night. One said he drove to Hamilton. Another claimed he "made a dash with a [railroad] handcar" over the five to six miles to the West Side.

The new warning was spread immediately through the West Side. "Through every street and alley went the men, yelling that there still was 30 feet [of water] to come, and to flee to the hills," the Hamilton Journal explained.

"Great excitement prevailed," the reporter said. "People jumped out of bed and rushed to the

River level in feet

Date	Dayton	Hamilton
March 20	2.7	2.8
March 21	2.8	3
March 22	3	3
March 23	3	3
March 24	7	4.8
March 25	24	19.7
March 26	28.1	34.6
March 27	22.2	25
March 28	15.7	19.2
March 29	11	14.8
March 30	9.1	N/A
March 31	7.3	N/A
April 1	6.6	N/A
April 2	5.8	N/A
April 3	5.4	7
April 4	9.5	13
April 5	10.2	11
April 6	7.1	6.3
April 7	5.9	5.3
April 8	5.2	5.5

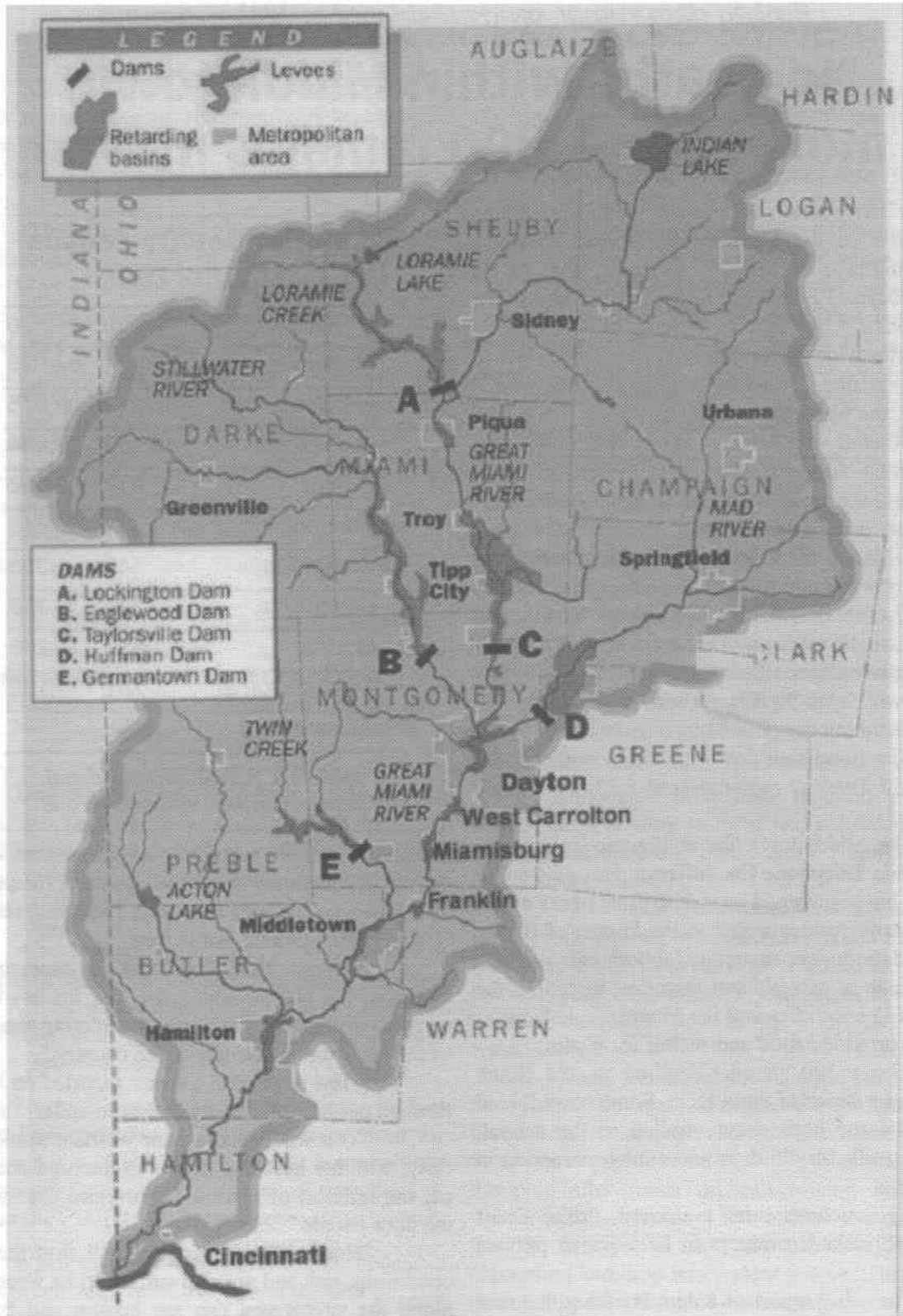
N/A = not available

From: *The Ohio Valley Flood of March-April 1913*
by A. H. Horton and H. J. Jackson, United States
Geological Survey of the Department of the Interior,
Government Printing Office, Washington, 1913

street without stopping to fully dress. Many gathered up their valuables, clothes and what else they could lay hands on."

"With the exception of a few scattered families," the Journal said, "practically everyone fled to the nearest hill, not stopping one moment to think."

The broken dam story wasn't unique to the Miami Valley in 1913. In other floods in other areas, there have been reports of "a wall of water" cascading down an unruly river, looking "like a dam had broken" up stream.



Great Miami River and the Miami Conservancy District
(map copyrighted by Miami Conservancy District; reprinted with permission)

Broken dam rumor sends residents to higher ground

No deaths within Middletown; more than 1,000 families moved

There were no deaths reported within Middletown as the Great Miami spread from the base of the hills of West Middletown, west of the river, to beyond Baltimore Street at Central Avenue on the east.

The wide flood plains immediately west of the city were under water by 10 a.m. Tuesday, March 25. Later, the water depth was reported at five feet at Central Avenue and Main Street in downtown, and seven feet on North Broad Street in Middletown.

By the peak at about 2 a.m. Wednesday, more than 1,000 Middletown families had been forced to leave their homes and 62 streets were covered by water and mud.

"Lefferson Street (Flemming Road) and North Clark Street from Lefferson to the Calvary Cemetery were about the worst sufferers," said the Middletown News-Signal. "These poor people lost nearly everything they had."

The flood shut down the city's water supply from 10:50 Tuesday morning until 5:30 Wednesday afternoon.

The Middletown Gas & Electric Co. and the Middletown Telephone Co. suffered damage to their facilities, but maintained service to most of the city.

Many residents fled to the homes of family and friends in higher eastern neighborhoods. Others found refuge in schools and factories, including the American Tobacco Co. and the Miami Cycle Co. Churches provided food and shelter for victims.

About 100 people huddled in the South School had a streak of good luck. Some cows forced to stray by the high water strolled to the school, providing milk for children and adults marooned in the building.

As structures were evacuated, Police Chief A. C. Mehl asked residents to help police prevent looting.

The same report of a dam breaking that sent hundreds of Hamilton residents to high ground also spread fright in Middletown.

"Lewiston Reservoir Reported to Have Broken; Whistles Will Blow If Any Danger Is

Butler County census 1910 & 1920

Area	'10	'20
Butler County	70,271	87,025
Hamilton	35,279	39,675
Middletown	13,152	23,584
Oxford	2,017	2,146
Trenton	564	618
Somerville	349	305
Seven Mile	340	369
Monroe	255	266
College Corner	181	162
Jacksonburg	55	44

Fairfield & New Miami not included
because they were incorporated later

Imminent," warned a headline across an extra edition of the Middletown Journal Thursday, March 27. There was no basis to the story, but some residents fled to higher ground, just in case.

A week after the flood, in assessing the situation, the News-Signal said "our lot has been a comparatively easy one when considering the extent of the catastrophe throughout the country."

A few days later, a writer reported on his trip through portions of the city that been under water.

"You would see a poor woman, muddy and dirty, with her husband scrubbing the mud and slush off the little bit of household furniture that was left the poor people."

"House after house you will find the same conditions, rich and poor all suffered," he wrote. "All along the streets you can see broken and battered furniture out beside the mud heaps . . . to be hauled to the dump."

For a few days, Middletown was isolated from its neighbors.

River didn't treat cities the same

Geography was a factor in the disparity in deaths in the cities of Hamilton and Middletown during the flood. More than 200, and possibly as many as 300 people died in Hamilton; none within Middletown.

The river swept around the city of Middletown from east to west before flowing south. Most of the community was east of the Great Miami River, which had a wide flood plain as it skirted that city. That configuration helped to spread the water and lessen the force of the current.

In Hamilton, the river narrowed as it flowed through the city center. Houses, apartments, stores and factories had been built to within a few feet of the stream.

The river was 390 feet wide in the vicinity of the High-Main Street Bridge in Hamilton in 1913.

In completing the Miami Conservancy District flood protection plan, the river was widened to a minimum of 520 feet between the toes of the river banks -- a 33 percent increase over the 1913 measurement.

Bridges between Middletown and West Middletown were swept away, as were spans of the Ohio Electric interurban line and the Big Four Railroad. Only the Trenton bridge survived in the Middletown area.

A newspaper report said "the two bridges at Middletown that span the river are about 200 feet apart. Neither of them are long structures and both are of the truss variety resting on abutments. Between them is a paved levee.

The high water carried away both the bridges and the levee between. The paved levee from the bridge to the CH&D station at Heno (West Middletown) for the most part remains standing. A part near the CH&D station has been washed away."

When the river calmed, two men opened a ferry between West Middletown and the foot of Fifth Street in Middletown. Complaints about price gouging and irregular rates -- from five cents to \$1.25 -- led to removal of one of the entrepreneurs.

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The Miami-Erie Canal also flowed through Hamilton and Middletown in 1913, but it didn't treat the cities the same.

In Hamilton, the canal (now Erie Highway or Ohio 4) was about a mile east of downtown. The canal levee served as a dam, protecting much of East Hamilton from severe flood damage.

In Middletown in 1913, the canal (now Verity Parkway, or Ohio 4) paralleled the Great Miami River before running through the center of the city. North of Middletown, the river and canal were only a few yards apart. As the river overflowed there, it spilled turbulent water into the canal, adding to the flooding in downtown.

South of Middletown, the village of Trenton was spared. It was several yards west of the river and on relatively high ground. The Trenton bridge also survived.

Not far down stream, Woodsdale suffered heavily. It sat close to the western bank of the river while higher land was on the east side, forcing the water to the west over the village. The Woodsdale bridge was destroyed and not replaced until 1916.

Although Middletown reported no flood deaths, the following story of two unknown victims appeared on page one of the April 1 edition of the Middletown Journal:

"Two unknown victims were added to the flood's toll of death when it was learned today that two men clung frantically to a telephone pole in Lakeside and then, when just about to be rescued, became exhausted and dropped to the swirling waters and perished.

"Harry Strodtbeck tells the sad tale. He says he watched the men through field glasses for 28 hours at varied intervals and finally induced two men in a boat to go to the rescue. The boat was nearing the pole after much difficult rowing against the current and was within a few rods of the pole when Strodtbeck says he saw the men weaken from exhaustion and drop into watery graves. Through the rain and the mist he could not identify them."

Possibly the men were not Middletown residents, and had clutched the pole while being carried down stream from a point north of Butler County.