

White River and the “Great Flood” of 1913: An Environmental History of Indianapolis

By Nancy M. Germano

On January 1, 1830, Catharine Merrill noted in her diary that she heard some men tell her the future of Indianapolis looked bleak. The new capital city was “situated in a vast mud-hole which could never be dried up so as to be depended upon. There’s White River, they said, overflows its banks. Fall Creek overflows its banks, and Pogues Run, though the least of the three, is the very worst to spread out over everything, . . . That bayou *is* awful. It’s mostly made up of mud, and mud drowns worse than water, as Mr. Norwood’s cow could prove if it were alive.”¹

From its inception, the city of Indianapolis battled swampy land and flooding. The commissioners to the state legislature explored possible sites for a new capital city in 1820, which apparently was a relatively dry year. They chose the site because of its central location in the state, because the land was level with rich soil for farming, and because they believed White River was navigable.

In the spring of 1821, residents of Indianapolis saw the first series of floods that would plague them in the years to come. The receding waters left stagnant puddles that provided breeding places for malaria-carrying mosquitoes. In January 1847, a thaw and a heavy downpour of rain lasting several days “unleashed the full fury of White River and Fall and Eagle Creeks.” Tons of churning water carried away homes and washed out whole sections of the National Road. “Far worse than the floods of 1828, the town’s distress was so great that the legislators extended the deadlines for payment of property taxes and remitted some.”² Major floods, like these mentioned, as well as less severe floods continually occurred.

Then, in March 1913, severe storms blew into the country from the northwest. The “Great Flood” of 1913 affected the entire midwestern section of the United States and received national attention. According to a United States Congressional report, the flood of 1913 stood out from its predecessors especially because of the exceptional magnitude and intensity of the storms and because the greatest damage occurred along tributaries, which in the past had not been the case. The United States Weather Bureau reported a rain total in excess of six inches during those five days. According to the Weather Bureau, the flooding that resulted “cost the lives of scores of people, rendered many thousands homeless, and destroyed property beyond estimate. . . . The enormous losses over such an extended area is unprecedented in the history of this portion of the United States, and it must follow that an occurrence so unusual must have been produced by extraordinary weather conditions.”³ Therefore, the 1913 flood was in part a natural occurrence.

¹*Catharine Merrill: Life and Letters*, collected and arranged by Katharine Merrill Graydon (Greenfield, Indiana: The Mitchell Company, 1934), 13.

²Edward A. Leary, *Indianapolis: The Story of a City* (Indianapolis/New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1971), 21 and 56.

³Department of Agriculture, Weather Bureau, *The Flood on White River in March, 1913*, by Verne H. Church, Section Director (Indianapolis, April 8, 1913), located at the Indiana State Library.

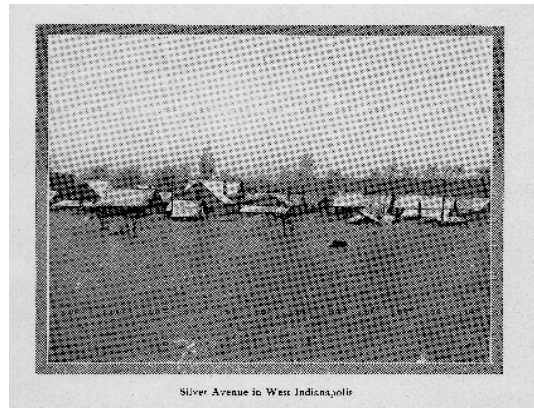
However, the devastation from the flood in Indianapolis was an artifact of the city's development and attitudes toward the use of the river.⁴

The local newspapers reported on tornados, floods, and fire from Nebraska to Illinois as the storms slowly marched toward Indiana. Stories of deaths, destroyed homes, ravaged railroad lines and bridges, downed telephone lines, and stranded communities filled the front pages. The storms entered Indiana on 23 March 1913 with a tornado that killed an estimated fifteen to twenty-five people in Terre Haute.⁵ *The Indianapolis News* reported on the destructive path of the storms producing flooding in every city in the state located near a river. Articles titled "\$500,000 Loss at Peru," "Over the Muncie Levee," "Boats in Carmel Streets," "Danville Cars Stopped," "Bloomington is Cut Off," and "Shelbyville Levee Breaks" appeared on a single page of *The Indianapolis News* on 25 March 1913.⁶

The rain began to fall in Indianapolis on 23 March and lasted for five days. In Indianapolis, the stone railing and part of the roadway washed from the east side of the Meridian Street bridge over Fall Creek.⁷ Stories and photographs in *The Indianapolis News* showed flooded streets and submerged houses in the area of Thirtieth Street and Central Avenue and in Broad Ripple. Floodwaters filled the basement and first floor of the new \$900,000 St. Vincent's Hospital that opened in February 1913 at Fall Creek Boulevard between Illinois and Capitol, but Sister Mary Joseph and her staff managed to move patients to the second and third floors.⁸

The flood hit West Indianapolis the hardest, including collapsing the Washington Street bridge, which linked West Indianapolis to downtown Indianapolis. West Indianapolis was a suburb that had been annexed to the city in 1897, located just southwest of downtown on the other side of White River. Its borders were White River to the east, the Pennsylvania Railroad line to the north, Eagle Creek to the west, and Raymond Street to the south.

In the early evening on 25 March water from White River crested and spilled over the banks, and West Indianapolis flooded east of Harding Street.⁹ In some places the water was from 10 to 15 feet deep. The flood washed away the tracks of the Belt railroad, from the Kentucky Avenue shops east to White River, and a heavy current ran through the gap made by the



"Silver Avenue in West Indianapolis," Photographs taken by a Daring Photographer during the worst of the horrible catastrophe, *Twelve Views of the Indianapolis Flood of March 1913* (Indianapolis: C. A. Tutewiler, March 1913). Indiana Picture Collection, Manuscript Section, Indiana State Library.

⁴Philip V. Scarpino, "Urban Environment," in *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*.

⁵"Relief is Given Indiana Victims of the Tornado," *The Indianapolis News*, 24 March 1913, p. 1.

⁶*The Indianapolis News*, 25 March 1913, p. 11.

⁷"Part of Meridian Street Bridge is Swept Out," *The Indianapolis News*, 26 March 1913, photograph and caption, p. 14.

⁸William Beck, *St. Vincent: The Spirit of Caring, 1881-2006* (Indianapolis: St. Vincent Health, 2006), 35-37.

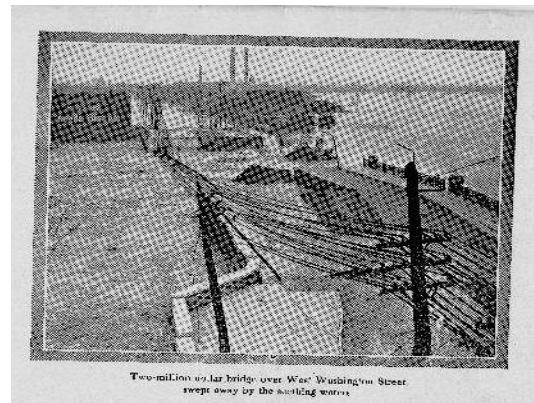
⁹Members of the Mary Rigg Senior Citizens Group, "Early West Indianapolis" (October 22, 1979), located at Special Collections, West Indianapolis Branch, Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, 5.

break in the Belt railroad levee. The Union stockyards in West Indianapolis were completely surrounded by water.¹⁰

Late in the afternoon of 25 March Mayor Shank notified Fire Company 19 at Morris and Harding Streets that the Morris Street levee was breaking. Within a few minutes, water began to flow into the station. By the time the firemen hitched horses to their wagons, the water had reached their waists. The lower floor of the fire station ultimately had water 9 feet deep, and the station was a half mile from White River.¹¹

When the levee south of Oliver Street broke, the torrential waters drowned a man, a woman, and a child in their own home. Rescuers in boats worked tirelessly to save the stranded families on roofs and from attics. Houses floated in the middle of the streets. Finally, at 1:30 a.m., the efforts stopped because rescuers could work no more, although many people remained stranded. “Cries of distress were heard from all sides during the early hours of the night, but as the night wore on the cries became fewer and feebler, and at 3:00 a.m., there was stillness in the flooded district.”¹²

On 25 March the rushing water swept away the Indianapolis & Vincennes railroad bridge over White River. All efforts on the part of the railway employees to save the Vandalia bridge proved futile. The police had expected the bridge to be washed away, and they backed onto the tracks five coal cars, two of them filled with bricks, to weigh down the bridge. On 26 March the east and middle spans of the West Washington Street bridge over White River gave way. The high tension feed wires that supplied electricity for the Indianapolis Street Railway Company over the bridge were almost in the river at places. The bridge tore loose from the pier on the east, and the end of the roadway went below the water. The water rushed over the roadway in torrents and gradually washed away parts of the railing. People standing at Washington and Illinois Streets testified that they heard the crash of the failing bridge.¹³



“Two-million dollar bridge over West Washington Street swept away by the seething waters,” Photographs taken by a Daring Photographer during the worst of the horrible catastrophe, *Twelve Views of the Indianapolis Flood of March 1913* (Indianapolis: C. A. Tutewiler, March 1913). Indiana Picture Collection, Manuscript Section, Indiana State Library.

The Secretary of the Indianapolis General Relief Committee for Flood Sufferers wrote in his report that “[w]hen the earth dykes across the bottoms began to break on Monday and the river to

¹⁰“Belt Railroad Track Reported Washed Out,” *The Indianapolis News*, 26 March 1913, p. 2.

¹¹James J. Divita, Professor of History, Marian College, *Workers’ Church: centennial history of The Catholic Parish of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in West Indianapolis* (Indianapolis: Centennial Committee, Church of the Assumption, 1994), 18; and *Indianapolis Star*, 30 March 1913, 23.

¹²“Reports of Bodies Seen on the Water,” *The Indianapolis News*, 26 March 1913, p. 14 (cont’d from p. 1).

¹³“West Washington Bridge Gives Way,” *The Indianapolis News*, 26 March 1913, p. 2.

overflow no one anticipated any great trouble.”¹⁴ But, the flood caught a multitude of people and drowned three people in their home.

The Pennsylvania Railroad commissioned a report to assess the damage to the rail lines and bridges. The railroad reported the stage at which flooding occurred at the Indianapolis station as 12 feet. The water level reached 25.7 feet in March 1913, a difference of 6.2 feet higher than the previous maximum level.¹⁵ Scientific recording of flood data did not begin until the twentieth century, but by all accounts, the 1913 flood was the greatest flood in the history of the midwest portion of the United States.¹⁶ The 1913 flood remains today the greatest flood event ever recorded in Marion County.



“A rescue,” Photographs taken by a Daring Photographer during the worst of the horrible catastrophe, *Twelve Views of the Indianapolis Flood of March 1913* (Indianapolis: C. A. Tutewiler, March 1913). Indiana Picture Collection, Manuscript Section, Indiana State Library.

The flood in 1913 reached new levels, compromised flood control measures previously implemented, and challenged city planners and engineers to devise new methods for flood control. By 1913, generations of Indianapolis residents had withstood almost a century of flooding. Yet, this flood exceeded all others. The Indiana State Planning Board prepared a report on Indiana flood damages following the 1937 flood, providing the following estimated costs of major floods:

FLOOD DAMAGES IN INDIANA

February, 1832	\$2,000,000
February, 1847	\$2,000,000
August, 1875	\$10,000,000
February, 1883	\$5,000,000
February, 1884	\$10,000,000
March, 1904	\$3,000,000
January, 1907	\$1,000,000
March, 1913	\$25,000,000
January, 1937	\$50,000,000

The Board noted that monetary damages from early floods were less, partially because the investment in physical improvements was considerably less in the younger days of the state.

¹⁴*The Indianapolis Flood of March, 1913, and Measures for Relief of Flood Victims*, Secretary’s Report. (Indianapolis: Cornelius Printing Company, 1913), 5.

¹⁵C. W. Garrett, comp., *A History of the Flood of March, 1913. Pennsylvania Lines West of Pittsburgh*, (Pennsylvania Company, 1913), 251.

¹⁶A. H. Horton and H. J. Jackson, *The Ohio Valley Flood of March-April, 1913 (Including Comparisons with some Earlier Floods)* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Government Printing Office, 1913), 47 and 51.

“Nevertheless, it may be stated definitely that floods are becoming more severe with the more extensive cultural use of the land.”¹⁷

Catharine Merrill’s pa and his friends discussed an important issue to them in 1830. The conditions in Indianapolis were a nuisance and challenged their survival, but the natural landscape also had far-reaching effects for future residents. After the retreat of glaciers that formed the landscape of much of the midwestern portion of the United States, the rich soil left behind bred hardwood forests. The site chosen for Indianapolis was a hardwood forest that also encompassed swampy valleys, one called Pogue’s Run ran diagonally across Indianapolis and another called Fletcher’s Swamp extended northeast of the mile square.¹⁸ Both of these swamps, along with White River, Fall Creek, and Eagle Creek, discharged their overflow in wet seasons via “ravines” that interlaced the area. Early settlers cleared the hardwood forests, thereby eliminating an important component of the natural drainage system. As the settlement of Indianapolis progressed, humans encroached more and more on the natural environment, and the level of measurable damages increased exponentially.

By the flood of 1828, greater damage occurred because farmers had begun to cultivate the bottom-lands. Floodwaters washed away fences and covered fertile fields with sand and gravel. Property owners began building earthen levees to protect their land from flooding, but the levees narrowed and strengthened the current of the river, especially those built by riverbank property owners. When the engineers built bridges, the spans were too short, so that the bridges acted like dams during high water restricting the flow of water and increasing its intensity.¹⁹ The Indiana legislature passed an act on 4 February 1837 appointing a commission to oversee the drainage of the swamps and lowlands northeast of the mile square of Indianapolis. The commission decided to cut a state ditch. The ditch disposed of the trouble with the ravines for about ten years until the bank of the ditch gave way on 1 January 1847.²⁰

Until the arrival of the first railroad in Indianapolis in 1847, the topography south of Pogue’s Run, which was rife with flood conditions, was of little importance to the city. Lake McCarty was one of the natural features causing problems in this area; the “Virginia River” was the other. In 1866, the Common Council of Indianapolis ordered Nicholas McCarty, Jr., to cut a ditch through his land to drain the pond into White River. In 1868, the Common Council adopted a more permanent solution by levying a sewer tax of 15 cents on each \$100 of property value and appropriated funds to build a sewer through Ray Street to the river to drain Lake McCarty. Likewise, the Virginia River caused problems. After heavy rains, it became a swiftly flowing stream from 15 to 100 feet wide and deep enough in places to “swim a horse.” With the growth of the city, the river became obstructed by street grades and culverts, it started forming deep ponds along its course, and its channel was deep and rapid, carrying a formidable body of water after heavy rains. The Committee on Sewers noted that these evils would increase with future

¹⁷“Indiana Flood Damage,” by Dennis O’Harrow, State Planning Board of Indiana, February, 1937, located at the Indiana State Archives.

¹⁸Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis: The History, the Industries, the Institutions, and the People of a City of Homes* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1910), 1:8-14.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 1:11-14; Divita, 17.

²⁰Dunn, 1:13-14.

street improvements; therefore, the Common Council approved lodging the river in the South Street and Kentucky Avenue sewer.²¹

The city's residents continually took steps to conquer drainage and flooding problems, and in the process, White River and the natural landscape underwent dramatic changes. As the town of Indianapolis grew and progressed into a "modern" city, additional concerns rose to the surface. Garbage and human waste disposal became an important problem which, combined with drainage and flooding problems, had to be addressed. The city hired Moses Brown, "the outstanding sewerage engineer in the nation," to plan a sewerage system. By 1873 workers had constructed 10 miles of conduits which, similar to systems adopted in other cities during this time, dumped into the river. The real purpose of the sewers was draining storm waters to prevent flooding streets. Residents continued to rely on privies or mere dumping in the yard or alley for human waste disposal. By 1893 "the accumulated filth of one hundred thousand people was enough to turn the stomach," and the Board of Health intervened and hired Rudolph Hering, a New York sanitary engineer of national reputation, to devise a new system. Hering's plan provided for a citywide system of conduits, with artificial and natural flushing. However, like the prior sewers, this system discharged its contents into White River.²²

By the end of the nineteenth century, the city's growth had created serious environmental problems for the river, and flooding took on more significance. Floodwater was not only a nuisance; it was dangerously unhealthy. The river regurgitated what had been dumped into it by the city's residents and businesses. The 1906 Proceedings of the Indiana Engineering Society reported on the condition of White River:

A black deposit of oily, foul, animal and vegetable matter can be raised from the bed for miles. The weeds are coated with grease and with sewage plants. Flats are covered with blackening offal; driftwood collects dead hogs and other animal refuse where they putrefy. The odor is distinct for 40 miles down the river. Animals will not drink it. It cannot be used for the laundry or other domestic purposes when the cisterns and wells go dry.²³

In addition to human and animal refuse, White River contained a large quantity of industrial waste from mills and strawboard factories that had cropped up along the river's banks.

By 1913, the impact of human intervention on the landscape not only increased the cost of flood damages, but it also exacerbated the site's inclination to flood and changed the nature of floodwaters. The caption under a large photograph on the front page of *The Indianapolis News* on 29 March 1913 stated that "Astor Street on the west side of Indianapolis, presented an excellent example of the insanitary conditions that caused the city board of health to take stringent measures in guarding against disease. In the water, which stood in pools, were dead chickens and other animals."²⁴ Day after day, the headlines and stories in the local newspapers

²¹Dunn, 1:14.

²²Frederick Doyle Kershner, Jr., "A Social and Cultural History of Indianapolis, 1860-1914" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1950), 253, 261-262; Scarpino.

²³Indiana Engineering Society, *Proceedings* (1906), 112, quoted in Kershner, 271.

²⁴"A Reason Sanitary Measures are Necessary," *The Indianapolis News*, 29 March 1913, 1.

reported on the conditions in West Indianapolis: looting and arrests, the dangers of disease, guards posted to prevent anyone who did not live there from entering the area, health advisors sent in to counsel on proper cleaning methods, women scooping mud from carpets with shovels, children playing on mud-covered porches, and troublesome drainage problems. The newspapers delivered a message to the people of Indianapolis that this area was unclean and unfit.

The Common Council of Indianapolis introduced an ordinance on 16 April 1913 to become effective immediately requiring daily police inspections for dangerous or unsanitary conditions and any violations of any city ordinance. The ordinance required each police officer to complete daily written reports with a description of the unsanitary or dangerous condition, the name of the offending person, and the names of any witnesses. If the premise was not cleaned or the danger not removed within five days, the police officer must file an affidavit charging the person with the violation. The police reports were declared to be public records for the use and benefit of the public at large and for the city of Indianapolis.²⁵ Thus, by 1913, flooding also produced negative labeling of the flood victims.

The “Great Flood” of 1913 highlighted the environmental changes that had occurred in Indianapolis since 1821. Although this retelling of the story of the 1913 flood may echo a declension narrative, it reinforces our link to the river and the surrounding landscape. As we are reminded by environmental historian Richard White, “what is real is the mixture of natural and cultural.”²⁶ The settlers and city developers wanted improvement—of land, unhealthy conditions, technology, urban spaces, and economic conditions. Unfortunately, unintended consequences became part of the mix.

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²⁵Common Council of the City of Indianapolis, Indiana, *Journals of the Common Council of the City of Indianapolis, Indiana, from January 1, 1913, to January 5, 1914* (Indianapolis: Sentinel Printing Company, 1914), 216-217. The Mayor of Indianapolis approved General Ordinance No. 34 on 21 August 1913 after the ordinance was amended to restrict each patrolman’s inspection and reporting responsibilities to his own district; by the time of approval, the language regarding the existence of an emergency was struck.

²⁶Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 111.