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The Great Flood of 1927 and Nature's Propensity to Create Human Conflict

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Abstract

The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 was one of the greatest peacetime disasters in American history, yet also one of the most forgotten. Failed levee policy coupled with an unusually high amount of rainfall in the Mississippi Delta created optimal conditions for the flood to take place and cover over 23,000 square miles. The flood highlighted social inequalities throughout the region as planters and the business elite exploited black refugees and the poor for personal gain. Politicians, engineers, and the Red Cross were all called upon to aid the disaster. Lack of initial government response warranted an expansion of federal river policy, but the social hierarchy of the Delta remained unchanged for years to come.

The Extent of the Flooding

The map on the right illustrates the scale of the flooded region. Numbers have been added to illustrate areas of interest that are topical to this essay:

- 1: Mounds Landing, MS- Massive levee break turns the flood into a national disaster. Newspapers begin coverage, Hoover and the Red Cross respond. Creates public debate over how the Flood should be handled.
- 2: Greenville, MS- Creation of a Jim Crow relief camp. Forced labor and internment of Greenville blacks. African American newspapers soon reveal problems of camp life, not only in Greenville but across the Delta.
- 3: New Orleans, Saint Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes, LA- The elite of New Orleans flood parishes to the east to save the city, promising their neighbors compensation. Tense class relations and failure to uphold this promise leaves these rural trappers embittered and poorer than ever before.

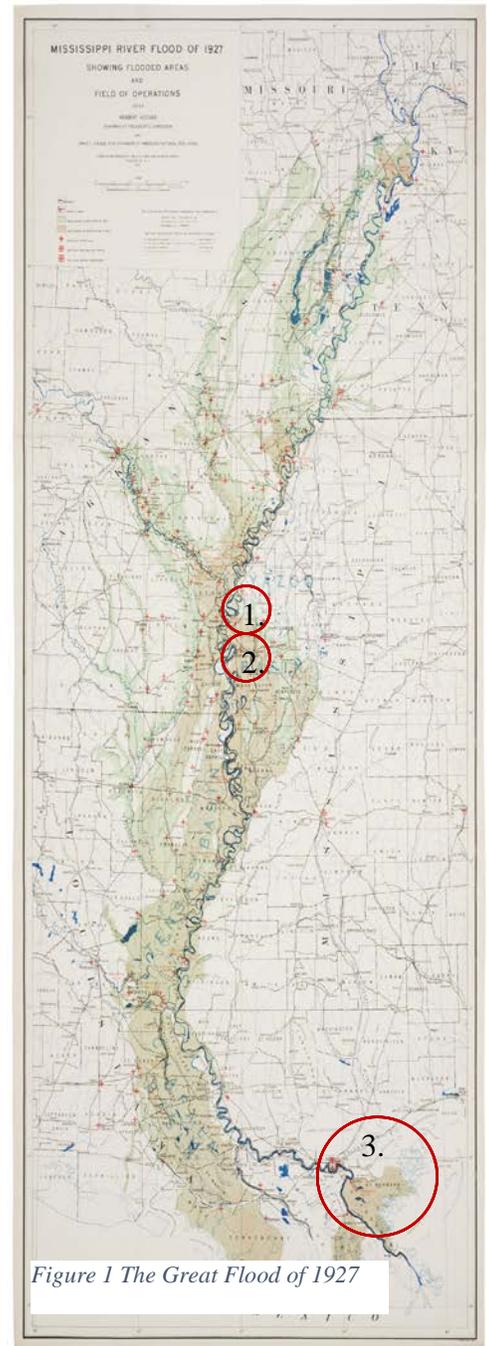


Figure 1 The Great Flood of 1927

Figure 1: Courtesy of the National Archives, Coast and Geodetic Survey, RG 23, accessed February 17 2018, <https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/023.html#23.4.2>.

In early 1927 months of remarkably heavy rainfall in the Lower Mississippi Valley culminated in April, with unparalleled flooding in the region. Levee after levee was destroyed, water rose in some areas to depths of thirty feet above the usual river level. The mighty river deluged 23,000 square miles of land. Entire communities were swept away, causing a massive refugee crisis involving hundreds of thousands. An estimated 250 people died. This event would come to be known as the Great Flood of 1927. This disaster sparked reactions from politicians, engineers, the Red Cross, and newspapers across the country. Actions were needed to tame the river and aid the victims, but it was no modest feat. The flood shaped conflict between federal and state governments which lead to an expansion of federal river policy, fostered the exploitation and detainment of blacks in relief camps, and allowed the business class of New Orleans to inundate and further impoverish the people of Saint Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes.¹

¹ For a better understanding of conditions in the American South leading up to the Great Flood, see C. Van Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951). A brief historical context and background of the Great Flood of 1927 can be found in, Christine A. Klein and Sandra B. Zellmer, *Mississippi River Tragedies: A Century of Unnatural Disaster* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); 62-78. For visual accounts of the flood's impact with captions, see Russell E. Bearden, "The Great Flood of 1927: A Portfolio of Photographs," in *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 388-404. For an in-depth comprehensive study covering politics, engineering, race, and class relations during the flood see, John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997). For a cultural narrative of the time and place see, Susan Scott Parish, *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017) and Pete Daniel, *Deep'n as it Come: the 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1977). To obtain African American perspectives on the flood see, Richard M. Mizelle, *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Jason David Rivera and DeMond Shondell Miller "Continually Neglected: Situating Natural Disasters in the African American Experience," in *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 4 (March 2007): 504-508; and William Howard, "Richard Wright's Flood Stories and the great Mississippi River Flood of 1927: Social and Historical Backgrounds," in *The Southern Literacy Journal* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1984); 44-62. For accounts of refugees and refugee camp conditions after the flood, see Patrick O' Daniel *When the Levee Breaks: Memphis and the Mississippi River Valley Flood of 1927* (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2013). For a history of levee building and control on the Mississippi River, leading up to, during, and after the flood, see Robert W. Harrison, *Levee Districts and Levee Building in Mississippi; A Study of State and Local Efforts to Control Mississippi River Floods* (Stoneville, Mississippi: Delta Council, 1951). For an official report of the actions taken by the American National Red Cross after the flood can be seen in, *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927: Official Report of the Relief Operations* (Washington D.C.: The American National Red Cross, 1929), accessed September 18, 2017, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015033926133>. The official flood control plan, later known as the *Jadwin Plan*, named after the Chief of Engineers can be seen in Edgar Jadwin, "The Plan for Flood Control of the Mississippi River in its Alluvial Valley: Presented to the Secretary of War and by Him to Congress," in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 135 (January 1928) 34-44, accessed September 18, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1016296>. This essay reads in three ways—Topically, Chronologically, and Geographically.

The Mississippi Delta was still considered a new frontier in the 1910s and 1920s. The majority of the state remained a vast wilderness which lacked institutions of any kind and was rife with crime. Homicides were more frequent in the Delta than anywhere else in the country. Judge Percy Bell noted that, “Shootings were comparatively frequent around [Greenville] saloons, and few if any white men were indicted or tried.” In contrast, 75 percent of imprisoned blacks from the Delta were convicted for murder, an unusual number even by Mississippi standards. Like the river running through it, the Delta was wild and unpredictable.²

Racial contention was high in the 1920s. The American South was responsible for two-thirds of the world’s cotton supply, made only possible by the rich soil of the Mississippi Delta and by the labors of African American sharecroppers. In theory sharecropping would be a fair agreement between white landowners and black laborers, but in practice it looked more like a form of re-institutionalized slavery. Despite the efforts of Radical Reconstruction, sharecropping gained an economic foothold in Mississippi, and wealthy land owners exploited African American sharecroppers for years to come.³

The white underclass often carried out the general lawlessness towards blacks that thrived in Mississippi. In contrast to the wealthy planters of the Delta, these whites came from the outer areas of the state known as “hill country” and they were ruthless to assert their dominance over blacks by any means necessary. Public lynching was common, and manifested itself in many abhorrent forms including burning at the stake or being hanged. Demagogic politicians like James K. Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo perpetuated the activity as they openly advocated lynching and white supremacy. During this time period the Ku Klux Klan was also an active and powerful force in southern political life, their message rooted in the “Lost Cause” of the

² Percy Bell, “Child of the Delta,” unpublished manuscript, 3, quoted in Barry, *Rising Tide*, 132.

³ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 102.

Confederacy. Poor blacks and poor whites had more in common than they openly acknowledged, this made race the dominating factor of distinction.⁴

Like any other frontier, the Delta teemed with danger, but opportunity as well. After the First World War, Mississippi experienced a burgeoning aristocracy of planters. The developing city of Greenville was an exceptional hub of capital and resources compared to most of the state. A bustling metropolis surrounded by cotton plantations, Greenville had country clubs, movie theaters, restaurants, and bowling alleys. There were three cotton exchanges in Greenville as well, making it the epitome of the New South's cotton industry. Greenville was an oasis amid the general unruliness of the state. Further down the river, New Orleans presented itself as the New South's center of wealth and influence.⁵

Throughout the 1920s, the American political climate was anti-regulatory in nature. Production was at an all-time high, and the nation experienced rapid economic growth. Consumer markets rose across the nation at a rate of 7 percent every year. The role of the federal government was still comparatively minor and did not interfere in the lives of average Americans, nor in the production of goods. President Calvin Coolidge was popular for his frugality and strong character, but was not a particularly skilled politician. Known to many as "Silent Cal," a general calmness characterized his term that followed the scandals of the previous Harding administration. Herbert Hoover, the more progressive Secretary of Commerce played a much greater role than Coolidge when the Mississippi flood waters finally rose.⁶

Despite the weak role of the national government, states throughout the Lower Mississippi Valley had asked for the federal government's assistance in flood control and navigation for years prior to the flood. In 1850, Congress authorized a large-scale survey of the

⁴ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 135-136, 142.

⁵ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 132-134.

⁶ David Reynolds, *America, Empire of Liberty* (New York: Basic Books, 2011) 274; Barry, *Rising Tide*, 262.

Delta. Soon, the Army Corps of Engineers began to build massive levees out of raw earth that for the most part, were structurally sound. A new problem would arise not from the levees that were built, but from adopted government policy that justified their construction.⁷

Heightened awareness of the river's problem created debate between federal and civil engineers for years that eventually led to a policy on the river that scholar John M. Barry referred to as "Levees-Only". Levees-Only supporters hypothesized the force of the river in one direction would scour the floor of the river and deepen it, effectively preventing flooding. Opponents of this policy argued for the creation of outlets along the river to allow the flow of water elsewhere, and they believed this was necessary to prevent flooding. Citizens of the Delta were reluctant to negate this policy, as it served their needs. The government rationalized the Levees-Only policy because it aided interstate commerce, a constitutional responsibility, by allowing improved flow of goods up and down the river. If the federal government were to improve river infrastructure via channels or spillways, it would be undertaking a job reserved for the state government. Levees-Only would soon display itself as a failed experiment.⁸

Rich whites, poor whites, and poor blacks all knew their status in the Mississippi Delta. Tensions long pre-existed the flood, but this large-scale disaster would perpetuate them even further as physical space became limited. New challenges amid the crisis would warrant the need for government action, but not without reluctance. When the levee at Mounds Landing cracked on April 21, 1927, disorder flooded the Mississippi landscape.⁹

The crevasse in the levee at Mound's Landing set a record for the largest break to ever occur on the Mississippi. Some levees were destroyed before and many thereafter, but Mound's set the disaster into motion from the national scope. Some of the first to respond to the break

⁷ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 34, 190.

⁸ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 34, 40-41, 157.

⁹ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 239.

were local sharecroppers, held at gunpoint to fill sandbags and stuff them into the gaping hole which did little to stop the current. Soon the top of the levee became the only dry land around. Animals and people were swept up and drowned in the torrent of muddy water. E.M. Barry told a harrowing account of a large plantation house and barn disappearing entirely under a 30-foot wall of water. In nearby Leland, Mississippi, Mrs. D.S. Flanagan's account of the flood stated, "waves five or six feet deep and just rolling and rolling. I never had seen it come like that, so dangerous looking, in all the floods I had been in." On April 22, General Green told the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, "The situation is far worse than can possibly be imagined from the outside, it is the greatest disaster ever to come to this section and we need help from the federal government to prevent the worst kind of suffering." The need for aid became clear as the failed levee at Mound's Landing alone, flooded an area larger than Puerto Rico with a population of over 185,000.¹⁰

¹⁰ E.M. Barry, interview by Henry Kline, *Mississippi Authority for Educational Television*, December 28, 1970, quoted in Barry, *Rising Tide*, 203; D.S. Flanagan, interview by Henry Kline, *Mississippi Authority for Educational Television*, December 2, 1970, quoted in Barry, *Rising Tide*, 204; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 22, 1927, quoted in Barry, *Rising Tide*, 205; Barry, *Rising Tide*, 200, 206.

Rising Tide was an invaluable secondary source for writing this paper and more than twenty years after its publication, is still the most comprehensive work on the flood. All other scholars who have written on the flood have referenced Barry. Many primary sources are quoted from within due to limited supply and access of contemporary newspapers, accounts, and oral histories of the flood.



Figure 2 The breach at the Mound's Landing levee.

The morning after the first levee broke, President Calvin Coolidge called together a small committee of five cabinet members to organize flood relief efforts. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover was appointed to lead the committee. Hoover worked alongside Vice Chairman of the Red Cross, James Fieser in order to encourage massive media attention to the region. The Official Report of Relief operations from the Red Cross stated that, “During the weeks that Mr. Hoover and Mr. Fieser were traveling from one end of the flood zone to the other by train and boat, they were accompanied by a large body of newspaper and magazine writers, many of them nationally known.” Fieser sent a memo to the Red Cross Headquarters in Washington that stated, “Essential push all publicity angles next week or ten days for sake of financial drive.” This massive push for relief was tantamount to Hoover’s political ideology of voluntarism, which held that the strong-willed should feel morally obligated to help their society through donation and

volunteer work. Hoover did not believe the government should directly be coerced into this role. The Red Cross, not the federal government, undertook the noble task of providing relief.¹¹

The Red Cross launched the Mississippi Valley Relief Fund which by the end of operations amassed a total of nearly 17 and a half million dollars. The Red Cross attributed this to massive community efforts: “Everyone wanted to do something and nearly everyone did do something.” Schools and churches across America ran local donation drives, children emptied their piggy banks. About 16,000 local Red Cross chapters donated something toward the relief effort. The American Red Cross quickly became the vehicle by which the efforts of voluntarism would display themselves after the flood.¹²

Despite the Red Cross’s efforts, the need for federal assistance was still prevalent. Congressional members from across the country urged President Coolidge to call a special session of Congress, but Coolidge was reluctant to act. On May 14, 1927, Democratic senator from Missouri, James Reed sent a telegram to Coolidge: “I feel warranted in asking whether you will not reconsider your decision now that nearly one half million people have been driven from their homes.” Despite appeals from senators like Reed, many people throughout the country were still in the same mentality as Coolidge and Hoover. This view held government aid could be damaging to moral character. The *Chicago Journal of Commerce* illustrated this perspective when it stated, “If relief sufferers were to become a government task, the self-respect of the recipients of funds would be decidedly damaged.... [he] may spend the rest of his life demanding more aid as his right.” In contrast, the *Jackson Clarion Ledger* posed an interesting enquiry:

Figure 2: Courtesy of NOAA Science Photo Library, accessed November 16, 2017, <http://www.photolib.noaa.gov/htmls/wea00733.htm>.¹¹American Red Cross, *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster*, 14; James Fieser to James McClintock, May 5, 1927, quoted in, Barry, *Rising Tide*, 273; Barry, *Rising Tide*, 240, 370.

It should be noted the Red Cross and the federal government have always had a close relationship. Founded in 1881, the Red Cross was established as a charitable organization via a charter granted by the United States government. Nevertheless, the Red Cross is not a government agency.

¹² American Red Cross, *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster*, 11-12.

The truth of the matter is that it has been necessary to school President Calvin Coolidge day by day a bit more towards the realization of the immensity of the catastrophe.... This new demand for aid from private citizens and corporations comes at a time when Secretary Mellon is announcing a surplus of millions in the treasury. Why should this tremendous burden be saddled on the people when the government has ample means to bear it?¹³

Coolidge did seem rather disconnected from this tragedy. Senator James Harrison of Mississippi invited Coolidge on behalf of four southern governors to visit the Mississippi Valley, inspect the region and also raise public awareness on behalf of the Red Cross. Coolidge offered a kind statement but did not visit the area.¹⁴

On May 1, 1927, a *New York Times* headline read, “Tennessee Senator Takes the Lead in Demanding Further Federal Action to Meet Mississippi River Dangers.” McKellar referred to the problem of flooding on the Mississippi as “a great national question.” McKellar argued it would make more sense for the government to fund improvements than risk another disaster which devastated the economy. He called together the senators of the nine states affected to create a plan to present to Congress in December that would remedy the flood problem. McKellar sought, “breached levees should be repaired at once and [that] the whole system thereafter should be rebuilt, added to, and made stronger and higher.” McKellar wanted the Army Corps of Engineers to be present as well. Edgar Jadwin, Chief of the Army Corps of Engineers commented a month later and labeled the flood, “a great problem one of the most important in the engineering history of our country.” The colossal failure of Levees-Only was revealed as a government disaster the

¹³ *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, May 31, 1927, quoted in Barry, *Rising Tide*, 373.

¹⁴ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 286, 372; Coolidge Papers, James Reed to Calvin Coolidge, Library of Congress, May 14, 1927, quoted in Barry, *Rising Tide*, 372; *Chicago Journal of Commerce*, May 4, 1927, quoted in Barry, *Rising Tide*, 372-373; “Coolidge Gets Appeal to Visit Flood Area,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1927, accessed November 1, 2017, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/104188745?accountid=11667>.

government ought to remedy, but the flood's outcome had already highlighted social inequalities throughout the region.¹⁵

After the levee at Mound's Landing broke, citizens of bustling Greenville knew the flood would soon reach them. Smithsonian curator and American historian Pete Daniel described the way the flood affected the population as they watched it approach: "Everyone who saw that water and heard it had that image branded in their minds forever, for it had the eeriness of a full eclipse of the sun, unsettling, chilling." David Cober lived on the outskirts of the city and was perhaps one of the first near Greenville to watch the flood's destruction. Cober witnessed a roaring torrent of water rush through the woods near his house, with waves five feet tall. His house flooded quickly, which forced him and his family onto the roof. The levee at Greenville was destroyed soon after.¹⁶

Conditions rapidly became bleak in Greenville. A local newspaper gave the report: "Flood conditions continue to grow worse in Greenville as refugees continue to be brought in from outlying sections and are huddled in every available space." As refugees began to move from the surrounding areas into Greenville, the once wealthy and prosperous city became teeming with starvation and sickness. The reasonable solution for Greenville would be to evacuate the area, but this was a cause of worry for planters. If blacks were evacuated, the entire labor force of the Delta may never return. Two days after Greenville flooded, a large portion of the city was evacuated with the help of seven steam ships. White women and children were the

¹⁵ "Tennessee Senator Takes the Lead in Demanding Further Federal Action to Meet Mississippi River Dangers," *New York Times*, May 1, 1927, accessed November 6, 2017, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/104188422?accountid=11667>; "Flood Control is Now the Nation's Huge Task," *New York Times*, June 19, 1927, accessed November 6, 2017, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/104149424?accountid=11667>.

¹⁶Daniel, *Deepn'n as it Come*, 15; David Cober, interview by John M. Barry, February 25, 1993, quoted in, Barry, *Rising Tide*, 303-304.

first to board the ships, their husbands a close second, but the majority of blacks stayed in the city.¹⁷

The efforts of the Red Cross prevailed. Besides raising funds, the Red Cross also established 154 refugee camps throughout the affected states. The Red Cross stated in their official report that camps were carefully designed and located, well-staffed, and sanitary. The Red Cross housed 325,554 refugees. Well-over half of the affected refugees were African Americans, which spelled trouble in the camps. Limited physical space created new boundaries, and with new boundaries came new racial proscriptions for blacks.¹⁸

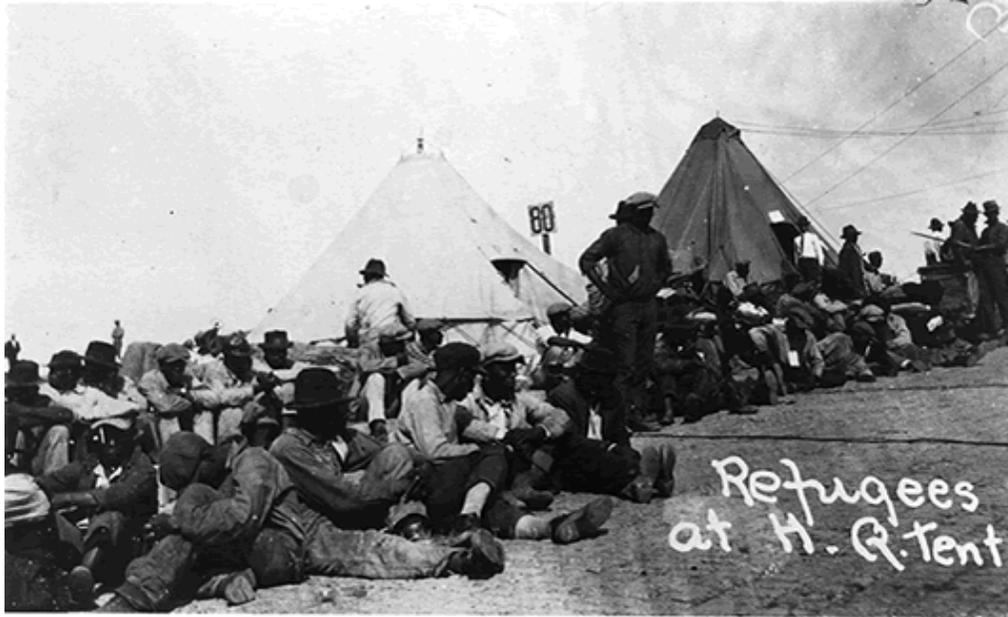
¹⁷ *Greenville Democratic Times*, April 23, 1927, quoted in Barry, *Rising Tide*, 306; Barry, *Rising Tide*, 309-310.

¹⁸ American Red Cross, *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster*, 40.

Black studies scholar Robyn Spencer attributed the main conflict of race within the relief camps to “The National Red Cross’s commitment to grass roots mobilization and voluntarism [which] allowed southern whites to operate relief camps with almost total autonomy.” Indeed, the Red Cross stated in their report: “Composed entirely of representative leaders who knew their communities and the circumstances of the families affected by the flood, these Red Cross Disaster Relief Committees rendered invaluable service in the kind of relief given.” The problem lay in the community leaders were more often than not were wealthy whites. Black refugees were often tagged to identify which planter they worked for prior to the flood. Travel outside of the camps was limited as well. Black refugees had to exhibit evidence of an alternative plan for themselves if they wished to leave the camps. In some instances, armed National Guard members were responsible for patrolling black camps to prevent escape. New restrictions assured wealthy planters that blacks would not migrate which would hasten their return as sharecroppers after the flood.¹⁹

Figure 3 Black "relief camp" in Greenville.

¹⁹ Robyn Spencer, “Contested Terrain: The Mississippi River Flood of 1927 and the Struggle to Control Black Labor,” *The Journal of Negro History* 79, no. 2 (Spring 1994): accessed October 24, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717627>, 172; “Refugees Herded Like Cattle to Stop Escape from Peonage,” *Chicago Defender*, May 6, 1927, accessed November 4, 2017, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/492149767?accountid=11667>; Mizelle, *Backwater Blues*, 38. Figure 3: Courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, accessed November 16, 2017, <http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/images/439.gif>.



The establishment and maintenance of Red Cross camps created a need for donations, but for a labor force as well. For planters operating black camps, this labor force was already present. Planter Will Percy told the *Greenville Democratic Times*, “no able-bodied negro is entitled to be fed at all unless he is tagged as a laborer.” Percy, the wealthiest planter in the Delta, led the flood relief committee for the Red Cross in Greenville. The *Vicksburg Evening Post* observed that “unlimited authority has been turned over to Mr. Percy, a kind of voluntary martial law being in effect in Greenville.” Refugees were forced to move and unload supplies for the Red Cross and were promised money, but not until the water receded. The unfair contract between planters and sharecroppers had remained the same, despite the drastic change in conditions the flood wrought. In effect, black refugee camps looked more like concentration camps aimed at supplying labor instead of providing real relief.²⁰

Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a prominent investigative journalist, Civil Rights activist, and co-founder of the NAACP, documented in *The Chicago Defender* a letter from a black refugee who chose to remain nameless. From Greenville, Mississippi, the refugee wrote, “Mrs. Barnett, our

²⁰ *Vicksburg Evening Post*, April 30, 1927, quoted in, Spencer, “Contested Terrain,” 174.

people are in slavery. They are held in camps here on the levee. Lots of them would leave here and try to find something better for themselves but they are held in these camps until some white man gets his plantation from under water.” The refugee also commented on other inadequacies and shortcomings of camp life, including a limited supply of rations for blacks. Sharecroppers who already had nothing became further indebted in their peonage.²¹

Incidents that unfolded in Greenville were not unique to the city. In nearby Vicksburg, a black refugee was shot by a national guardsman after trying to bring outside food and supplies into a camp. *The Chicago Defender* cited the existence of “Jim Crow relief camps” in at least five major cities in Mississippi, as well as Memphis, and all over Arkansas.²²

The Red Cross responded with the creation of the Colored Advisory Commission. This group was to “visit the refugee camps and assist in solving some of the perplexities in which this race was particularly involved.” Unfortunately, the Red Cross did not record in any detail how the commission functioned. A statement given by a Red Cross official in *The Crisis* affirmed that “since they did not create the social conditions in the south” they were not responsible as providers of temporary relief to change the social hierarchy. Although it seemed incongruent with their humanitarian values, the Red Cross did not try at length to defy the deeply entrenched power structure in the region.²³

Back in Washington, Neval H. Thomas of the NAACP gave a speech to his local chapter members where he addressed the failures of the relief response. Neval warned them not to donate to the Red Cross because the monies would not aide black refugees. Neval sought to find black agencies to donate to that would promise real betterment for his community. *The Norfolk*

²¹ “Brand Ministers in Flood Area as Betrayers,” *Chicago Defender*, July 16, 1927, accessed November 1, 2017, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/492160729?accountid=11667>.

²² “Refugees Herded Like Cattle to Stop Escape from Peonage,” *Chicago Defender*, May 6, 1927.

²³ American Red Cross, *Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster*, 29; “The Flood, the Red Cross, and the National Guard,” *Crisis*, January 1928, 5, quoted in, Parish, *The Flood Year 1927*, 45.

Journal and Guide asked its audience to donate to the cause, but it asked for donations to black churches, local NAACP chapters, and black fraternities and sororities. Ida B. Wells-Barnett wrote in *The Chicago Defender*, “Only race can act, nobody else is going to do anything about it if we don’t.” Through actions like these, African American communities contributed to the popular “racial-uplift” which was the leading black ideology at the time. African American newspapers became a preferred *modus operandi* for activists like Ida B. Wells and Robert Neval. As black newspapers circulated through northern cities, a much different narrative was revealed to its audience than the one perpetuated by the Red Cross. Black refugees were not the only group marginalized by the flood’s impact, as another tragic story unfolded down the river.²⁴

As the flood moved south towards Louisiana, the elite class of New Orleans became anxious at the city’s dismal outlook. Although Greenville was the center of commerce in the Mississippi Delta, New Orleans was the by far the richest city in the region. The center of wealth and influence in the city lay in an organization known as “The Board of Liquidation.” Founded in 1880 by local bankers, the Board of Liquidation was originally created to help pay off the large debt left behind after Reconstruction. The Board was made up of nine members, the mayor and two councilmen, as well as six “syndicate” members who made the important decisions. These officials were not elected, and handpicked new members served as old members stepped down or died. In fact, the only elected officials, the Mayor and the Councilmen, effectively had no power at all. This made the political structure of the Board extremely undemocratic.²⁵

²⁴ Mizelle, *Backwater Blues*, 77; “Neval H. Thomas Pleads for Flood Sufferers,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, June 11, 1927, quoted in Mizelle, *Backwater Blues*, 75; *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, May 7, 1927, quoted in Mizelle, *Backwater Blues*, 78; “Flood Refugees Are Held as Slaves in Mississippi Camp,” *Chicago Defender*, July 30, 1927, accessed November 7, 2017, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/492137164?accountid=11667>. African American elites advocated racial “Uplift Ideology” during the late 19th into the mid 20th century, and sought to change the image of the race to one of respectability through positive action, which targeted the community as a whole.

²⁵ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 219-220.

Just east of New Orleans lay the parishes of Plaquemines and Saint Bernard. These rural areas were composed mostly of working class whites, many of whom made their living off trapping. Through muskrat trapping and selling of pelts, citizens of these areas contributed a good deal to the state economy. The relationship between these trappers and New Orleans was significant, as many sold their pelts to fur traders in the city. Unfortunately, as the flood approached, the business elite and bankers in New Orleans would make a critical decision on behalf of these people.²⁶

When news of the flood reached New Orleans, the elite class needed to find a way to restore confidence to the people as well as secure their own interests. The *Times-Picayune*, a local newspaper run by the Board of Liquidation tried to temporarily remedy the issue by addressing reports as false and reporting there was no cause for concern. The paper was ignored. The people of New Orleans climbed the levee and observed the water as it rose higher by the day. The bankers and business class soon decided the best way to prevent the city from flooding was to blow up the levee at Saint Bernard Parish. By doing this, the water would be diverted away from New Orleans and flood these parishes instead. Their decision was carefully calculated and aimed to save the city, but did so at the expense of their rural neighbors.²⁷

James Thomson, a newspaper publisher and Board of Liquidation member, presented the plan to dynamite the levee to Dwight Davis, Secretary of War and Edgar Jadwin, Chief of the Army Corps of Engineers. After a large flood threatened the city in 1922, Jadwin had directed the Board to blow a hole in the levee if something similar ever happened again. At the meeting, Secretary Davis told Thomson that if the governor of Louisiana would send him a formal request

²⁶ Gay M. Gomez, "Perspective, Power, and Priorities: New Orleans and the Mississippi River Flood of 1927," in *Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs: Centuries of Change*, edited by Craig E. Colton, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000) 110, 113.

²⁷ *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, April 22, 1927, quoted in Barry, *Rising Tide*, 225; Gomez, "Perspective, Power, and Priorities," 114.

to blow up the levee the federal government would take it into consideration. On April 24, Thomson succeeded and Governor Oramel H. Simpson agreed to the dynamiting of the levee, but only under three circumstances. Simpson wanted a definitive written statement from the Army Corps of Engineers that dynamiting the levee was in fact necessary, legal opinions granted him the authority to have the levee dynamited, and written agreements from New Orleans promised compensation for any victims of the parishes. Now local, state, and federal government were all in agreement to dynamite the levee at Saint Bernard.²⁸

The people of Saint Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes knew they could not stop the interests of the New Orleans elite. In a *New Orleans States* interview, Saint Bernard Parish local sheriff L.A. Meraux spoke on behalf of the community:

We're letting them do it because we can't stop them.... you can't fight the Government. I have a hell of a time trying to get my people to see that.... They wanted to go to the levee first with their women and children and their weapons, and tell the State of Louisiana to come ahead and cut the levee—but it would be cut over their dead bodies first. We managed to talk them out of that for their own good.²⁹

The fur market in New Orleans provided these people with an income, losing the city would mean losing their livelihood. A local resident, Joseph Campo illustrated the power of this relationship with his experience: “A man came to tell us to get out. If the crevasse would not be opened then New Orleans would be lost and we all would be lost as well. We understood.” On April 27, Governor Simpson declared a state of emergency and ordered the evacuation of Plaquemines and Saint Bernard and the cutting of the levee at Caernarvon near Saint Bernard

²⁸ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 222, 240-241, 244.

²⁹ L.A. Meraux, interview by Meigs O. Frost, quoted in Lyle Saxon, *Father Mississippi: The Story of the Great Flood of 1927* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 1927) 337.

Parish. Refugees of the Saint Bernard and Plaquemines began to evacuate and head for refugee camps in New Orleans.³⁰

³⁰ Joseph Campo, interview, quoted in, Gomez, “Perspective, Power, and Priorities,” 115; “Governor Orders Levee Cut Below New Orleans; Residents Ordered Out,” *Washington Post*, April 27, 2017, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/149798076?accountid=11667>.

On April 28, the *Times Picayune* described the scene at Saint Bernard Parish as residents fled from a distinctly wealthy and urban viewpoint: “Simple souls and primitive, bittered with the loss of their homes, their gardens and their fisheries, they are nevertheless resigned at last to fate and secure their faith in a rich neighbor which has turned to them in its hour of danger.” The National Guard sent units to the parishes to evacuate nearly 10,000 residents. Not all evacuated voluntarily, *The New York Times* reported some opposition from bands of armed locals that refused to leave. Most however acquiesced, and on the following day, the levee at Saint Bernard was dynamited to create what would become known as the Caernarvon Crevasse. Sheriff Meraux was present at the event and commented as he witnessed the river spilling into his precinct: “Gentlemen, you have seen today the public execution of this parish.” The levee was blasted for ten days. Initially, some engineers were doubtful the breach in the levee would indeed protect New Orleans, while others criticized the action as being unnecessary, as natural crevasses further

upriver had evinced. Nevertheless, as the crevasse was widened and the water diverted, faith was restored to the people of New Orleans.³¹

Although the city had been saved, the people of Saint Bernard and Plaquemines lost everything. As Governor Simpson had required, the Reparations Commission was established to



Figure 4 Dynamiting of the levee at Caernarvon.

help refugees from Saint Bernard and Plaquemines be reimbursed for their losses. Unfortunately, the system for reimbursing refugees did not fulfill its promise to the fullest. What resulted was a system of “partial-payments” where refugees were compensated only for certain things they lost, but not others. One stipulation the Commission enacted only reimbursed residents for personal property, which meant their normal harvests of muskrats or other animals which were state property, were lost. The *Saint Bernard Voice* illustrated this problem the refugees now faced:

³¹ *Times Picayune*, April 28, 1927, quoted in, Gomez, “Perspective, Power, and Priorities,” 114-115; L.A. Meraux, interview by Meigs O. Frost, quoted in Saxon, *Father Mississippi*, 339; Gomez, “Perspective, Power, and Priorities,” 116; “New Orleans Levee to be Cut to Make New Orleans Safe; Wide Area to be Evacuated,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1927, accessed November 7, 2017, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/104168969?accountid=11667>; “New Orleans’ Peril to Remain, is Fear, Despite Levee Cut,” *Washington Post*, April 28, 1927, accessed on, November 10, 2017, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/149773613?accountid=11667>; Barry, *Rising Tide*, 342. Figure 4: Courtesy of the Library of Congress, accessed November 16, 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2002709277/>.

“The city’s reparation committee has been cutting and slashing each claim in half and less than half, even though these claims be absolutely accurate and justified.” Claims from residents of lost income racked up quickly, and several cases made their way to the New Orleans Supreme Court. None of the plaintiffs received any compensation for their loss of income. Governor Simpson and the bankers and businessmen failed entirely to deliver on their moral promises and thus, left the people of the parishes homeless, poor, and disillusioned.³²

On July 20, nearly three months after the flood began, the progressive magazine, *New Republic* commented on the ongoing problems that still plagued the area. Though coverage was fairly significant, they criticized the press for not giving the flood the attention it deserved. The magazine stated: “As to this it may truthfully be said that the most serious phase is still in the future; and that it constitutes one of the gravest problems the nation has faced since the Great War.” The majority of people in the region who relied on farming would return from the refugee camps to muddy fields unfit for cultivation, their homes in ruins or gone completely. The article ended with a call to action for the federal government to create a new system of flood control and rehabilitate the region’s economy. *Scientific American* published a similar article which articulated the issue as only one the federal government could fix. In the final days of the emergency, the Red Cross was praised for its continued aid and Coolidge was condemned for not taking action.³³

By January of the following year, Chief of Engineers, Edgar Jadwin presented a plan to Congress that refuted the Levees-Only policy. The Jadwin Plan sought to build spillways and

³² Barry, *Rising Tide*, 346-347; Gomez, “Perspective, Power, and Priorities,” 120; *Saint Bernard Voice*, September 3, 1927, quoted in Barry, *Rising Tide*, 355; Burkhardt v. Board of New Orleans Levee Commissioners, quoted in, Barry, *Rising Tide*, 359; Foret v. Board of New Orleans Levee Commissioners, quoted in Barry, *Rising Tide*, 359.

³³ “After the Flood,” *New Republic*, July 20, 1927, 216-217, accessed November 8, 2017, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,cookie,url,cpid,uid&custid=s8863137&db=rgr&AN=522156990&site=eds-live&scope=site&authtype=ip,uid>; J. Bernard Walker, “Curbing the Mississippi,” *Scientific American*, February, 1928, 144-146, accessed November 8, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26121849>

redefine “federal control over structures within natural floodways.” Jadwin acknowledged the flaws of the levee policy. Jadwin cited the estimated damage cost of the 1927 flood to be over \$200 million dollars, while he estimated his plan to cost just short of \$300 million dollars. The Jadwin Plan plainly stated:

The cost of this project is unquestionably justified. It will prevent a repetition of the widespread disaster, human suffering, dislocation of the economic life of the valley, interruption of interstate commerce, and the effect on the general welfare of the nation, that attended the recent flood.³⁴

The people of the Delta welcomed the Jadwin Plan, as the floodwaters finally receded on the cusp of the 1928 flood season. While federal action had not been taken to aid conditions after the flood, it would be taken to prevent another disaster on the river.³⁵

The Jadwin Plan influenced legislation and on May 15, President Coolidge signed the 1928 Flood Control Act into law. The law allotted \$325 million for the creation of four new floodways to channel water away from the river, one of which was built specifically for New Orleans. Levees were to be built to a higher standard, and a hydrology lab would be built “to bring scientific study to the management of the Lower Mississippi River.” The 1928 Flood Control Act marked significant growth in the role of the federal government, but it paled in comparison to the rapid expansion that would take place within the next decade.³⁶

³⁴ Jadwin, “The Plan for Flood Control of the Mississippi River in its Alluvial Valley,” 40.

³⁵ Jadwin, “The Plan for Flood Control of the Mississippi River in its Alluvial Valley,” 34-44; “People in the Area Devastated by the Mississippi Await Action by Congress on Engineers’ Plan to Prevent Future Disasters,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1928, accessed on November 17, 2017, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/104324574?accountid=11667>.

³⁶ Jadwin, “The Plan for Flood Control of the Mississippi River in its Alluvial Valley,” 34-44; Matthew T. Percy, “After the Flood: A History of the 1928 Flood Control Act,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 95, no. 2 (Summer 2002): accessed November 17, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40193521>, 190-191.

The Great Flood of 1927 warranted an expansion of the federal government and revealed social inequalities throughout the Mississippi Delta. The New South was a place full of opportunity for planters and businessmen who operated like kings, and a difficult life for those indebted to them. The government's Levees-Only policy was a huge failure, and in part caused the flood to take place. When the flood came, it brought conflicts that allowed the wealthy to take their exploitation a step further. Local politicians asked the federal government to aid victims, but instead placed its faith in the Red Cross. Massive humanitarian efforts by the Red Cross succeeded in raising millions in donations, but fell short by passively allowing the creation of black internment camps. Purposeful flooding of Plaquemines and Saint Bernard parishes revealed a perplexing conflict between the rich and poor after residents were deceived and left destitute by the elite. In 1928, the Flood Control Act saw improvements in river policy headed by the federal government, but the social hierarchy of the Delta took decades to decay.

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