"Ruin and desolation scarcely paralleled" : An examination of The Virginia Flood of 1870’s aftermath and relief efforts

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“Ruin and Desolation Scarcely Paralleled”

An Examination of the Virginia Flood of 1870’s Aftermath and Relief Efforts

Paula Fielding Green Weddle

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

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Department of History

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FACULTY COMMITTEE:

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Dedication

Dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Bertram W. Kite, Sr., whose stories sparked my interest in history and laid the groundwork for this research.
Acknowledgements

There are so many people who have helped and guided me over the course of this project and exhibited immense patience while I worked on this research. I first want to thank my thesis committee for their insightful comments and suggestions. Dr. Dillard has been a wonderful source of encouragement and knowledge. His direction has kept this work from pursuing many rabbit holes and tangents that were interesting but may have distracted from the larger argument. His good natured attitude and unvarnished candor has made it a joy to work with him. Dr. Friss and Dr. Hyser have provided great comments and suggestions for shaping this thesis and have been a pleasure to work with. I’d especially like to thank Dr. Friss for his insight into the website component. Finally, I’d like to thank Dr. Carole Nash who suggested an array of helpful sources and always provides wise advice. It has been wonderful to work with her on this endeavor especially since she was also my mentor during my undergraduate years in the Anthropology Department.

This work required a lot of on-site research with primary sources. For their gracious work providing materials, I would like to extent a thank you to the staff at the Library of Virginia, Virginia Historical Society, Valentine Museum, University of Virginia’s Special Collections, Warren Heritage Society, Page County Clerk’s Office and the Warren County Clerk’s Office. I’d also like to thank JMU’s Library staff, particularly Patricia Hardesty and the Interlibrary Loan department. Additionally, since my work required an abundance of microfilm research, I would like to thank the ILL staff at the Library of Virginia and University of Virginia for generously loaning JMU their microfilm collections.
My classmates were an absolutely amazing group of people who shared this journey and went out of their way to welcome me into the class as one of their cohorts. I have received an amazing amount of encouragement and support from all of them, but would like to also thank a few specific individuals. I’d like to extend a big thank you to Megan Sullivan and Xavier Macy for helping me to study for my comprehensive exams. I’d also like to thank Xavier for being a constant source of encouragement and an all-around amazing colleague.

Throughout this endeavor my workgroup has shown an abundance of support through words of encouragement and accommodating time off for classes and research. My supervisor, Mikki Butcher, has been an amazing person to work with and a wonderful friend who always offered words of support. April Beckler is the most amazing person to share an office with. She always knows what to say to bring me back to reality and keep me from being so hard on myself. Ginny Schneider, Laura Montanez, and Ashley Kreis have all been wonderful people to work with who always offered words of support and helped share my daily workload when I was out of the office. My student assistants Rosemarie McGinty, Rebecca McCallister, and Troy Lovelace were all a part of his journey at different times. They are three of the best people I could ever hope to meet and never failed to brighten my day with their presence alone.

I want to extend a special thank you to Carolyn Kyger & Thomas Green for being amazing parents who always encouraged my love of history through trips to historic sites, weekends wandering antique stores, long talks about artifacts and historic events, and even allowing me to perform my first “archaeological dig” the garden after a family trip to Tredegar Iron Works when I was in elementary school. They laid the beginning
groundwork for this research by instilling the importance of history through their daily actions and love.

Finally, this work would not have been possible without the care and support of my friends and family who have not given up on me even when I disappeared into thesis research-land. My husband, parents, brothers, in-laws, and friends have been amazingly patient while I sequestered myself away for weekends of research and writing. I can’t thank them enough for all of the support, encouragement, understanding, and caring gestures that have nurtured my life for the past two years. Though all were patient and caring, I need to extend a special thank you to my husband Billy, who graciously allowed me to pursue this dream while putting our lives on hold for three and a half years of classes and graduate school time. Words will never be enough to express my appreciation for his generous actions and understanding for all of the times that I babbled on about flood damage, environmental history, and material culture for the past several years. Thank you for being my sounding board, grammarian, husband, and friend.
Preface

In 1996, as a fifteen year old, I moved to Page County, Virginia. During my first week of 10th grade at a new high school, I witnessed virtually everything in the county shut down for a few days in the wake of Hurricane Fran. I can still remember the sound of the beating rain on the tin roof outside of my window. At that point in time, I could not envision how those days would shape my life in the future. In a way it sealed my fate as a future graduate of Page County High, instead of the respective Dinwiddie County High to which I longed to return. In turn, those few days also shaped my later decision to go to JMU and pursue Archaeology and Art History. However, most related to this thesis, it gave my grandfather, Bertram Kite Sr., the opportunity to talk about the Flood of 1870. This was the first of many historical discussions and the beginning of an academic bond between us.

At the time, I listened with interest to the story, but didn’t give it much additional thought. A few years ago, something sparked my curiosity and I decided to see if there was anything on the flood in the Page News and Courier from 1870. I was absolutely blown away by an eloquent piece describing the plight of people in the Shenandoah Valley. The comparison to the hard war that they had endured grabbed my attention and made me want to know more about how they rebuilt their lives without the benefit of insurance and social aid programs. I was also fascinated by the fact that a flood that I had always associated only with Page County was much larger in scale, but nothing has been devoted to its scholarship. I was not yet in the Masters of History program and after much thought decided to pursue the study of History, not only to grow as a person, but also to learn the correct historical methods for research and delving into this story.
The more I dug, the more attached I became to individual stories which I wanted to tell using correct methodologies and historiographic approaches. In the process, I became interested in environmental history, disaster scholarship, socio-economic inequality, and how these themes often overlap.

This work has been a difficult journey, fraught with sleepless nights and sequestered writing time, but it has been a work of love - for both my Grandfather, who would have been so interested and for all those whose voices were silenced by the floodwaters. I hope this research is a useful contribution to the historiographical record that helps to illuminate the lasting impact of the Virginia Flood of 1870.
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Abstract

During the autumn of 1870, a massive flood engulfed parts of Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland. The turbid waters claimed over 100 lives and left communities and residents along the James, Shenandoah, Potomac, Rappahannock, Anna, Rivanna, Maury, Middle, South, Staunton, Rockfish, Tye, and Pamunkey Rivers in varying states of distress. At least one quarter of Virginia was affected by the storm and subsequent flooding, making it significant to multiple areas of the State through the loss of life, property, and infrastructure.

This thesis examines the flooding event in detail through both a written thesis and website component. The written thesis is broken into two parts, each of which focus on different aspects of the flood. Part 1 provides a detailed record of the storm and the flood damage combined with analysis of the flood’s place in history. This part examines the destruction as a regional event rather than a sectional local history, following the flood along two paths; from Staunton, Virginia to Georgetown, Maryland along the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers, and Lexington to Richmond by way of the James River and its tributaries.

Part 2 examines the subject of relief for the sufferers of the 1870 Flood. While the majority of relief came from nearby neighbors and residents of the region, there was also a statewide Legislative Relief Committee. The examination of charitable aid further illuminates the impact of regional property destruction and loss, while also illuminating
post-Civil War disaster relief practices during Reconstruction. This part delves into four instances of local relief committees and how they interacted with the Virginia Legislative Relief Committee.

Finally, as an ongoing project, 1870flood.com will examine the flood through both individual stories and broader historic scholarship. Through a comprehensive casualty list, the website will attempt to tell the stories of those who lost their lives and the family members who were left to pick up the pieces. By combining the traditional thesis analysis and the website public history project, this research aims to begin filling the historiographical gap while also illuminating the impact of the Virginia Flood of 1870.
Introduction

“It was a fearful sight as house after house succumbed to the current and went dashing into the stream amid the fearful shouts of their occupants: while suddenly the extinguishment of light and the floating away of a dark mass of debris told too painfully the story of death.”

Hidden in the shadows of public memory and historical scholarship lies an event that shaped the regional history along the James and Potomac River basins. During the autumn of 1870, a massive flood engulfed parts of Virginia, West Virginia and Maryland. At the time, it was considered the worst flood in memory to have impacted the area in terms of destruction, casualties, and depth of water. However, few scholarly works reference its occurrence and those that do have a tendency to only cover selective parts of the event. As a result, the existing analysis of the Virginia Flood of 1870 is fragmented and generally relegated to smaller local histories. Consequently, its role as a regional natural disaster and factor in the economic landscape of Reconstruction has evaded historic scholarship.

While there were several devastating floods before and after this event, the 1870 flood stands out as unique because of factors relating to its place in time, the regional scale of damage, and number of casualties. The floodwaters claimed over 100 lives and left communities and residents along the James, Shenandoah, Potomac, Rappahannock, Anna, Rivanna, North(now Maury), Middle, South, Roanoke, Staunton, Rockfish, Tye, and Pamunkey Rivers in varying states of distress. The rain from the storm and resulting flood impacted at least twenty-two counties in Virginia, two in West Virginia, and two in

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Maryland.\textsuperscript{2} At least one quarter of Virginia was affected by the storm and subsequent flooding, making it significant to multiple areas of the State through the loss of life, property, and infrastructure.

In order to understand the extent and range of the flood’s geographic boundaries, it was first necessary for the event to be defined and reconstructed from the available source material. Since the National Weather Service was not yet in existence, there are no official records or statistical data for this weather event. As a result, knowledge of the event has been obtained from available extant newspaper publications from September and October 1870 that were published in Virginia and the relevant areas of West Virginia and Maryland. While working through these publications, every river, creek and stream that was mentioned as rising to flood stage was marked on a digital map to create a visual representation of the known impacted area.\textsuperscript{3} Primary sources located in Special Collections at the University of Virginia, the Library of Virginia, the Virginia Historical Society, the Valentine Museum, and local county court records were also consulted. While a few letters and unique documents proved to be fantastic resources, the most abundant source of information pertaining to the flood is contained within nineteenth century newspaper publications.

Newspaper coverage was the primary source of mass communication and media coverage about the flood and its aftermath. As a source, it is invaluable for opening a window into the past that reveals local culture and immediate reactions to certain events. However, its consistent reliability is debatable. On one hand, newspapers were often

\textsuperscript{2} There are areas of the state where the information is spotty. For example, there is a blurb about the floodwaters being high in Floyd County in Southwest Virginia. However, there is relatively little information because the sources no longer exist.

\textsuperscript{3} See Figure 1 on page 10
utilized as a mechanism for disseminating public notices and keeping official committee records. For example, the minute book of the Richmond Chamber of Commerce in 1870 often used cut out newspaper articles as official minutes instead of handwritten notes.\(^4\) This indicates its perceived reliability for this instance; however, there are times where the inaccuracies are glaring. Local hearsay in the wake of the flood often erroneously pronounced people dead. As a result, it is not uncommon to see the story retracted several days later. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge political bias and varying personal agendas, such as embellishing a story to be paid a higher wage for column length.

To avoid potential inaccuracies, individual newspaper accounts of damage and death have been compared to a variety of available source materials. By consulting personal papers, diaries, ledgers and other miscellaneous records, source materials were cross checked for accuracy. The variety of sources has fleshed out the event from multiple perspectives and helped to confirm specific events, deaths, and instances of damage. The result is a more comprehensive, but still incomplete, interpretation of the flood and its aftermath.

While this thesis attempts to include as many diverse voices and perspectives as possible, source limitations ultimately restrict a fuller understanding of the flood from diverse first hand perspectives. The most common and well-documented interpretation of the flood comes from middle to upper class white males. Occasionally letters and other sources representing white female and lower middle class individuals have been located. However, I have been unable to find first-hand accounts from African American sources or those living with limited means prior to the flood. As such, the scholarship relating to

\(^4\) “Chamber of Commerce Records, 1867-1985”, (MS. C58, Valentine Museum, Richmond, Virginia)
this event does not encompass all viewpoints from a firsthand perspective. Despite the limitations, I have made every effort to represent and discuss diverse groups through any available source materials in order to tell a more complete story of those who lived through the freshet.\(^5\)

The secondary works that discuss the flood most often reduce it to a county or city level. Books such as, *Scottsville on the James* by Virginia Moore, *A Short History of Page County, Virginia* by Harry M Strickler, *The Strange Story of Harper's Ferry* by Joseph Barry, and *Lynchburg and its People* by W. Asbury Christian discuss the local aspects of the flood. However, these works most often restate local newspaper coverage and recount community memories in the space of a chapter or less. Unfortunately, there are no secondary sources that focus solely on the 1870 flood or attempt to cover it as a regional event. This thesis will attempt to begin filling the historiographical gap by analyzing the flood on a regional scale and discussing the aftermath and relief efforts.

In order to better understand the flood in terms of its historical context, several secondary works have been invaluable for examining both Reconstruction in Virginia and contemporary nineteenth century disaster responses. Richard Lowe’s *Republicans and Reconstruction in Virginia, 1856-70* provides an in depth account of Virginia’s changing political climate from the pre-war years to Virginia’s readmission to the Union. *Yankee Town, Southern City* by Steven Elliot Tripp delves into the dynamics of Lynchburg City during this era by exploring race relations, socioeconomic differences, local politics, and the role of religion. This book does an excellent job of analyzing the city’s changing

\(^5\) A freshet is a flood that results from precipitation, generally heavy rain or melted snow. The term has fallen out of favor in modern usage. However, it was widely used during the nineteenth century and will make several appearances in this work.
relationship with caring for the poor and is particularly helpful for unpacking the nuances of Lynchburg’s flood relief efforts.

With regards to sources that examine other contemporaneous disasters, Elizabeth Sharpe’s *In the Shadow of the Dam: The Aftermath of the Mill River Flood of 1874* provides a good comparison of how several communities dealt with a devastating flood that occurred unexpectedly when a dam broke. The flood is smaller in terms of the geographical impact, but absolutely devastating to the communities along the Mill River in Massachusetts. Sharpe thoroughly examines the flood responses in each community and how local politics played a role in the recovery efforts. This scholarship provides an excellent comparison for how relief funds were raised, thought about, and distributed during the early 1870s. While not as close of a comparison, I also looked at Karen Sawislak’s analysis the Chicago Fire relief efforts in her book *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874*. She devotes an entire chapter to aid analysis and how relief was provided on a large scale. Her analysis regarding the politics of relief illuminated the use of social stratification and efforts to control the urban poor. While it is a very different type of disaster in terms of location, scale, and publicity, it is helpful to look at as an additional source of relief thought, especially since it occurred almost exactly one year after the 1870 Flood.

Reports of the “Virginia Flood” can be found in the majority of American newspapers following the disaster. Papers from Baltimore to San Francisco contain coverage in varying degrees. Most recount the damage which occurred in better known industrialized or urban areas, such as, Richmond, Lynchburg and Harper’s Ferry. However, areas which are closer to the region or with significant business interests there
had a tendency to cover the event in incredible detail. For example, *The New York Times* ran at least twelve articles relating to the flood between October 1st and 6th 1870, with several spanning multiple columns. The extensive *New York Times* coverage is likely related to business relationships between New York and Virginia companies and the paper’s large readership, which may have been interested in the topic. Additionally, *Harper’s Weekly* and *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, both weekly illustrated papers with a large national circulation, covered the event with written information and several engravings. The extent of newspaper coverage indicates that the event was of great interest to the American public at the time of its occurrence. However, since that time, the freshet as a whole has largely been forgotten.

There is not a clear answer as to why knowledge of the 1870 Flood has remained strong in certain areas and obscure in others. My initial awareness of the event came from a life-long resident of Page County who lost relatives during the flood several generations ago. It is possible that community memory is stronger in areas where there are higher rates of residential continuity. However, this seems to be only part of the cause since several other factors, including historical interest and community focus on a variety of historical events appear to influence the public narrative regarding disasters.

Disaster history as a whole seems to play a small role in traditional historical scholarship. Until fairly recently, historic publications relating to natural disasters in nineteenth century America were often limited to human interest stories without significant analysis. Even with a well-known disaster, such as the Johnstown Flood in 1889, books were published recounting the tales of the flood, but little analysis was
devoted to the aftermath or distribution of aid. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that history monographs were devoted to the event with substantial analysis.

The emergence of disaster analysis seems to have its roots in the twentieth century. Interest in the study of disaster relief appears to be tied to society’s changing expectation of the role of organized relief. As the United States has expanded social welfare programs, an expectation and interest in the role of government relief has grown. My own interest in historic relief sprouted from questions about how people dealt with disasters and traumatic economic loss. My interest in changes regarding relief thought and practice have influenced the focus on this work and guided the content analysis in Part 2.

In order to comprehensively analyze this event, this thesis is comprised of a formal written analysis and a website component. The goal of this project is to serve as a combination of traditional scholarly work and accessible public history. Since the traditional written thesis does not lend itself particularly well as a medium for telling the stories of many individuals, the website is devoted to understanding the impact of the flood through individual accounts, damage reports, and public interaction. Additionally, the traditional written work safeguards this scholarship against potential “link rot”, a current pitfall of web scholarship.

The written component is broken into two parts which focus on different aspects of the flood. Part 1 provides a detailed examination of the storm and resulting flood damage with analysis of the flood’s impact interspersed throughout the analysis of the geographic region. This part follows the flood along two paths; from Staunton, Virginia to Georgetown, Maryland along the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers, and Lexington to
Richmond, Virginia by way of the James River and its tributaries. This section attempts to immerse the reader in the flood experience and give a fuller sense of the scale of the damage. By examining the destruction as a whole event rather than a sectional local history, the reader gets a better sense of the immense scale and daunting task of relief. This style also helps to illuminate how contemporaries wrote and thought about the flood. In 1870, the flood was not regarded as something that just happened to one town or county, but rather a larger swath of the mid-Atlantic region. Part 1 also briefly looks at another major flood event which occurred prior to 1870. The 1771 Virginia Flood affected a similar geographic area and is the event to which the 1870 freshet was most often compared. Because it has been so long since a flood of this magnitude had occurred, the shock and devastation associated with the flood in 1870 was greater due to a lack of known precedence and anticipation of a 100 year flooding event is the Western part of Virginia.

Part 2 turns directly to the subject of relief for the sufferers of the 1870 flood. While the majority of relief came from nearby neighbors and residents of the region, there was also a statewide legislative relief fund. Looking at relief further illuminates the scale of property destruction and loss, while also shedding light on post-Civil War relief efforts during Reconstruction. The language and appeals of the relief efforts often evoked and utilized healing sentiments between Virginia and certain northern states, specifically, New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. The healing rhetoric expressed a desire to move forward and attempt to leave the wounds of the Civil War in the past.

This section also delves into how localized responses in different impacted areas were affected by local politics and regional differences. Additionally, a large section of
this analysis is devoted to the statewide relief effort that was initiated by General John D. Imboden. His letter to the New York Herald is examined for its political undertones and historical context. The ways in which the varying committees approached relief help to better understand regional relationships. Finally, the part also briefly touches on how the death of General Robert E. Lee less than two weeks after the flood changed the tone of attention from flood relief to mourning and fundraising for memorial statuary. Together these themes reveal different ways in which the residual effects of the war and Reconstruction impacted philanthropy in the wake of an extensive natural disaster.

Finally as an ongoing project, 1870flood.com will try to detail as fully as possible the tales of individuals affected by the flood. Through a comprehensive casualty list, the website will attempt to tell the stories of those who lost their lives and the family members who were left to pick up the pieces. There is also a section that mirrors the damage coverage in Part 1 and will attempt to create a ‘digital tour’ of the impacted areas. By combining the traditional thesis analysis and the website public history project, this project aims to begin the process of filling the historiographical gap and illuminate the regional impact of the Virginia Flood of 1870. For those who lived through it, the flood was regarded as one of the worst events in the history of the area, prompting one commentator to proclaim it was “…a scene of ruin and desolation scarcely paralleled by the havoc effected during the late war.”

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6 The domain 1870flood.com has been purchased for 10 years and will be available until December 2025. At that point, the website may revert to the free wix.com address of weddlepf.wix.com/1870flood.
7 The Late Destructive Flood,” Virginia Free Press, October 8, 1870, 2
Figure 1

Map of the Impacted Area Based on Extant Newspaper Coverage.

Use Control + Click to Enlarge Map and Access a Larger Web Version

Image created using an 1869 railroad map held at the Library of Congress. Rivers impacted by the flood are highlighted in blue.

G.W. & C.B. Colton & Co., *Map showing the Fredericksburg & Gordonsville Rail Road of Virginia, leading from Fredericksburg, via Orange C.H., to Charlottesville, where it connects with the Chesapeake & Ohio R.R. and the extension of the Orange & Alexandra R.R. to Lynchburg*, New York, 1869.
Part 1

A Massive Storm, the Immediate Aftermath, and Historical Context

“To the ear it sounded as if the elements were holding a concert on the grandest scale of musical compositions. The pattering and silvery tinkle of the millions of rain-drops—the trickling and murmur of thousands of rills—the babbling and splashing of the streams—the roar of the innumerable cataracts, and the sullen, deep, and subdued sounds of the mighty flood and the breaking waves all united in a chorus, that can neither be described nor conceived of in its solemn grandeur.” – The Virginia Gazette, October 7, 1870.

In the darkness, the bell tolled a slow, moribund ring as the waves of the flood rocked a building recently lifted from its foundation in the Shenandoah Iron Works. Around nine pm, amongst the dizzying noise of rushing water and crashing buildings, the bell of the carpenter’s shop sounded its last ring when the entire structure was swept away and carried down the Shenandoah River. Mr. Staling, a German painter who was visiting the Iron Works, dramatically summed up the scene by exclaiming, “Mein Gott! It sounded like the death knell of the world!”1 Similar stories and accounts of unexpected terror engulfed the news and the grabbed the American public’s attention after the flood swept a wave of unprecedented death and devastation over a large region encompassing parts of Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland.2

The Storm

A sprinkle of rain began to soak into the dry, cracked earth on the afternoon of Wednesday, September 28, 1870.3 At the start of the storm those living in the Western part of Virginia, were overjoyed that an extended drought appeared to be over. According

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1 “The Flood,” Rockingham Register, Oct 13, 1870.
2 While there have been several other flooding events in Virginia, the 1870 Flood is unusual because of the regional scale of death and destruction of property along several rivers. The 1877 Flood was geographically similar, but there were few casualties.
to one newspaper, the drought in Richmond caused gardens to be “burnt up” to the point that fall vegetables almost completely disappeared from local markets. Many local papers in the storm’s radius contained either excitement or relief at the prospect of rain. In Charlottesville, the Charlottesville Chronicle commented that “…some rain fell here on Wednesday after an unprecedented drought. The dust in some parts of the town was four inches deep.” Over fifty miles away, in Page County, the Shenandoah Valley reported that “…by nightfall the whole Page valley(sic) were rejoicing over the grateful cessation of the long and severe drought that had parched and baked and burned their fertile fields.” The day before the storm, the drought was referenced in the Staunton Spectator’s witty humor column which detailed a specific way that a New Hampshire preacher prayed for rain that requested, “Not a tearin, drivin rain, such as harrers up the face of natur, but a drizzling, sozzlin’ rain, such as lasts all day and pretty much all night.” The quoted prayer echoed the sentiments of many Virginia residents who hoped for a good soaking rain to ameliorate the drought stricken land.

The lengthy nature of the drought caused the prospect of rain to be at the forefront of public thought since it impacted everyday life for most people in the region. Those who made a living through agriculture depended on rain for their crops and livelihoods. From an industrial perspective, various types of mills, iron furnaces, and other industries were dependent on, and typically powered by, river and stream water. Additionally, shipping and transportation along the inland waterways and canals depended on sufficient water levels for boats to move efficiently. Finally, water provided the most basic

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5 “Rain,” Charlottesville Chronicle Sept 28, 1870.
7 “Lunch for Humorists,” Staunton Spectator, September 27, 1870.
necessity for all living beings as a part of their daily sustenance. Without an adequate water supply the consequences could have been dire, immediate, and long lasting for the entire region, through basic necessity and a variety of economic consequences.

Unfortunately, excitement at the prospect of rain became short-lived when the storm changed from a steady rain to a heavy downpour over the course of Wednesday night and Thursday morning. The earliest mention of the storm begins in Charlottesville where “a steady rain set in this vicinity” around noon on Wednesday, September 28th. From there, the storm appears to have moved west, drenching Lexington in the afternoon and moving north through the Shenandoah Valley. In Rockbridge County, John Horn noted in his sawmill ledger that the rain began “at 1 o’clock (and) never stopt(sic) until the 30(th) at 12 o’clock.” Another account stated that, “…rain began to fall in the upper part of Page County, about 5 o’clock on the afternoon of Wednesday, the 28th, from a black and heavy rain cloud, which made its appearance from the south-east.” While the origin of the storm is unclear, contemporary accounts indicate that it was a massive storm which hung over the region from Wednesday through Friday.

Since reliable weather records are scarce and large portions of Virginia do not have extant newsprint or weather references from this time period, it is hard to pin down if the storm originated at sea as a hurricane, but many factors support this possibility. From several newspaper accounts, the storm appears to have swept westward from around Charlottesville to the Blue Ridge Mountains. However, it appears to have bypassed Richmond since the flooding on the James River originated further inland and Richmond received little actual rain. A handwritten, now anonymous, source at the

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8 “Local Matters, The Freshet,” Charlottesville Chronicle, October 1, 1870.
9 Papers of the John Horn Sawmill, Rockbridge Baths, Va. University of Virginia Special Collections.
10 Wayland, A History of Shenandoah County, p.361.
Valentine Museum in Richmond, claimed that the wind was so fierce that it swept down several telegraph lines and information had to be routed in roundabout ways. The source speculates, “destructive winds must have been quite general as the wires of the telegraph lines of the Orange and Alexandria and Southside Rail Roads were down and a message had to be sent to Richmond by way of Augusta, GA or Louisville KY, a distance of over two thousand miles.”\(^{11}\) If this is indeed correct, it would partially account for delays in information from various parts of the impacted region and help explain why the storm is harder to track in certain areas. There is also an important tidbit in the *Charlottesville Chronicle* that reveals that the storm “ceased in violence for a time only to be renewed with increased vigor at the closing of the day of Thursday.”\(^{12}\) When examining all of the extant evidence of the storm’s characteristics, strong winds, heavy rain persisting for days and a possible “eye” of the storm crossing Charlottesville, it becomes plausible that the freshet may well have resulted from a tropical storm.\(^{13}\)

By Thursday afternoon, Lexington, Virginia reported receiving rain of an “aggregate depth of 10 ½ inches” which had fallen in eighteen hours.\(^{14}\) To add perspective, the *Virginia Gazette* remarked, “This is the heaviest continuous rain that has fallen here for many years: probably the greatest that ever fell. We regard it a heavy rain here that gives 2 inches of water.”\(^{15}\) By Friday, September 30\(^{th}\), the total amount of rainfall had increased to fourteen inches, which equates to about eight gallons of water.

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\(^{11}\) “Freshets – Freshet of 1870,” Flood clipping hanging file. *Valentine Museum*, Richmond, VA

\(^{12}\) “Local Matters, The Freshet,” *Charlottesville Chronicle*, October 1, 1870.

\(^{13}\) According to the written evidence, it appears that the winds would have been approximately 38-54 miles per hour which equates to an 8 or 9 on the modern Beaufort scale. A storm with wind at this mph that originated between 5 and 30 degrees North latitude is classified as a Tropical Storm. There is currently a dearth of evidence to fully confirm the nature of the storm. However, its timing, amount of rainfall, and presence of high winds lend credence to this hypothesis.

\(^{14}\) “Remarkable Rain,” *Virginia Gazette*, September 30, 1870.

\(^{15}\) “Remarkable Rain,” *Virginia Gazette*, September 30, 1870.
per square foot. On the whole, Lexington alone would have received rain equating to a staggering 608,249,600 gallons which would have swollen the Maury River (formerly the North River) and contributed significantly to the high water levels and flooding along the James River. The John Horn Saw Mill Papers recorded a similar depth at Rockbridge Baths, about fifteen miles north of Lexington. According to their record, it rained for forty-eight hours and the “fall was 11 ½ inches” measured “in a tub.” Although the measurements vary, the recorded depths indicate a consistently heavy rainfall in this region, well above a normal storm. While some areas may have received more or less rain than the recorded amounts in Rockbridge County, the regional accounts show consistent similarities to the timing and duration of the rain, which converted the waterways in its path into sweeping torrents. The normally peaceful veins of water became cutting scythes of unstoppable power as the rain brought death, destruction, and economic loss to families and communities that were in the path of the rushing water.

According to most nineteenth century sources, the damage was regarded devastating and incalculable. Hundreds of dwellings, businesses, mills, and bridges were lost to the high water, many of which had recently been rebuilt following the conclusion of the Civil War. In regards to Richmond alone, the Richmond Whig lamented, “It is difficult to approximate the loss sustained by our citizens by this unprecedentedly great flood.” The immense breadth of the destruction made it difficult to completely assess all of the damage and losses. The Evening Telegraph in Philadelphia stated, “No estimate of

16 The amount is calculated using the USGS rainfall calculator to measure 14 inches of rain over a 2.5 square mile radius, the current size of Lexington. An article in the Virginia Gazette presented a similar calculation by rounding the area of Rockbridge County to 650 square miles and calculating the rain based on the fourteen inch measurement. However, the figure is somewhat inflated because Rockbridge only encompasses 607 square miles according to their official county website and the calculation assumed that the rain was a consistent depth across the county. Their figure estimated that 158,146,550,000 gallons of rain fell.
18 “The Great Flood,” Richmond Whig, October 3, 1870.
the loss can be made…”  

19 Others mention the impossibility of making completely accurate estimates.  

For example, the *Clarke Courier* estimated that the damage in Clarke County, Virginia would “not fall short of $200,000.” Estimates of the overall damage in Virginia varied between $5,000,000\(^2\) and $25,000,000\(^2\) in 1870 Dollars. The higher estimate of twenty-five million equates to about 460 million in 2014 dollars.\(^2\) However, these estimates appear to be low and may be the result of only receiving part of the story. In truth, the sources are correct in stating that the total amount of damage was almost impossible to enumerate. Attempts at the task are daunting and troublesome due to reporting generalizations which fail to list all damage and only focus on certain areas.

When looked at as a regional event, it is revealed that at least 100 people lost their lives, making it one of the deadliest floods to occur in nineteenth century America.\(^2\) As recently as 1985, articles estimated the total deaths to be around sixty people. The remaining forty are lost either through sectional analysis or piecemeal research. In fact, it is likely that far more lives were lost, however without mandatory recordkeeping many of the reports remain incomplete and at the mercy of newspaper journalism which often presented conflicting accounts. The sheer amount of death, destruction, and loss had a profound impact on those who lived through it and were directly affected. In several

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22 “Virginia Losses $25,000,000,” *Virginia Free Press*, October 8, 1870.  
24 The deadliest flood to occur in nineteenth century America actually took place 19 years later in Johnstown, PA. The 1889 Johnstown flood occurred when the South Fork Dam broke after heavy rain. Without warning the entire town of Johnstown was inundated, killing 2,209 people. According to the newspaper coverage, the 1870 flood appears to have been the deadliest flood in Virginia history to that point. While it will take more research to determine its full context within the larger flood history of the United States, it currently appears to be the 10th deadliest flood in U.S. history.
instances, those who lost immediate family members found themselves grieving in the public eye and subject to commentary.

The intensity of the storm and the resulting flood brought many changes to the impacted region and played a part in reshaping the history of the area on a local and regional scale through the loss of life, property, and infrastructure. The following pages will attempt to reconstruct and describe the scale and extent of the flood damage, which is essential to understanding its importance to the history of the region. When compared to other floods that impacted the vicinity prior to 1870, the only major comparable instance took place almost a century earlier in 1771. As a result, much of the affected area was unprepared for the height of the water and resulting scale of destruction. The knowledge or lack thereof, in regards to potential water height and the oncoming flood played different roles regionally. In Richmond, the death toll was mitigated due to a warning from Lynchburg. However, Harper’s Ferry did not have the benefit of a warning and lost at least thirty-one people to the turbid waters. Additionally, the timing of the flood in the wake of post-Civil War rebuilding adds to its historic importance by revealing how Reconstruction Virginia dealt with a major natural disaster. It is also important to attempt to understand how those who lived through it perceived and dealt with the freshet as an unprecedented occurrence. These combined factors make the flood an important historic topic to study. This part will attempt to place the reader in the midst of the flood and illuminate its unique place in the disaster history of Virginia.

As Mr. Stalling called “Mein Gott!” while the bell tolled in the Shenandoah Iron Works in Page County, the storm had already caused flooding across the region in Rockbridge, Augusta, and Rockingham Counties. However, the worst of the flooding
would occur over the next eighteen hours, as the Shenandoah River began a full rampage northward to Harper’s Ferry and the James River rose to a cresting height of at least thirty feet in Richmond. Moving in opposite strokes of an “L”, a large swath of the region would soon be underwater. To reconstruct the main path of the damage, the next two sections will track the flood along the major waterways. The first section will follow the flood northward from Staunton, Virginia through Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia and onto Georgetown, Maryland. The second section follows the James River east from Lexington, Virginia to Richmond, Virginia.

**Staunton, Virginia to Georgetown, Maryland**

The rain commenced near Staunton in the afternoon of Wednesday, September 28th and continued “almost incessantly, from that time till Friday.” The flooding around Staunton was believed to have been caused mainly by the rain that fell there on Wednesday evening. Within twenty-four hours, Staunton received 9.35 inches. While there is no specific height ascribed to the flood in this area, the writer for the *Staunton Spectator* claimed that “…all the streams in this part of the State were higher than ever before, so far as the memory of man, records, or tradition reveal.” The same writer claimed that the Middle River and South River were “six to ten feet higher than the highest watermarks made within the memory of the oldest inhabitant.” Although the actual height is unknown, statements of this nature reveal that the crest of the flood was considered to be abnormally high by those who lived through it. The *Staunton Spectator* reaffirmed this notion when it asserted that it had “no doubt” that the Shenandoah River

was much higher “than it has been since the settlement of the Valley.” Unfortunately, an official height was not recorded in Staunton or most of the affected areas. Only a few locations recorded flood depths in the entire impacted area. According to official flood markers, the flood along the James River crested at 30.7 feet in Scottsville and 24’ 1/8” above the low water mark in Richmond. There was likely a wide variation in water depths. Along the Shenandoah River, contemporary newspaper reports claimed that the river crested at approximately sixty feet above the low water mark near Front Royal where the North and South Forks of the Shenandoah meet. This location was likely abnormally high due to the confluence of the rivers. Additionally, the recorded water depths may not be entirely accurate since most relied on estimates provided by local residents.

Even though the depth of the water is unknown in Staunton, reports of the damage to the city’s municipal infrastructure are prolific. Both the gas and water lines were swept away leaving one half of the city in darkness and the other without fresh water. The *Staunton Spectator* reported,

“...the water and gas pipes were broken, which had the effect of depriving for a short time, those living East of that place, of water, and those living West, of gas. The West-enders groped in darkness, but quaffed delicious water, the East-enders would have "preferred darkness to light," not "because their deeds were evil," but because, like Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner," with "water, water, everywhere," they had "not a drop to drink."

Partially without water or access to gas light, the city’s transportation was also halted when the bridge across Main Street succumbed to the rushing water. While the damage

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29 Scottsville Flood Marker; “Stone Pillar, Turned Turtle...” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, April 1, 1936.
30 “The Late Flood,” *Shenandoah Herald*, October 6, 1870.
was disruptive, it could have been much worse. The *Staunton Spectator* made a point to praise the Town Council for taking action after a flood in 1860 damaged the business district. The Council proactively widened and deepened the channel associated with Lewis Creek. Because of this work, the editor of the paper firmly believed that the freshet “would have destroyed utterly the greater part of the business portion of the city…” and that “No more judicious expenditure was ever made by the Town…” The improvements to the creek helped to spare Staunton from the brunt of the flood. However, the surrounding area was not as fortunate.

The vicinity around Staunton was confronted with the mass destruction of mills, bridges, houses, fencing, farms, crops, and other infrastructure on a scale that rendered it impossible to fully enumerate all instances of loss. The *Staunton Spectator*’s flood coverage at times read mainly as a succinct damage report, listing known losses of dwellings, mills, bridges, and other personal property. Many of those who suffered from the flood had only recently rebuilt or repaired structures and property lost during the Civil War. As an area that suffered directly from the wartime campaigns of David Hunter and Philip Sheridan, the comparison to wartime loss and the flood was a readily available analogy that resonated with much of the area. Poignantly, a local newspaper pointed out, “The destruction of property caused by this freshet in this county, is vastly more than that caused by the armies - friendly and hostile - during four years of destructive and desolating warfare.”

While it is possible that the newspapers overstated this claim, the assertion that the flood either equaled or surpassed the war in terms of property destruction is echoed

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33 “Heavy Rain – Terrific Freshet,” *Staunton Spectator*, October 4, 1870.
34 “Heavy Rain – Terrific Freshet,” *Staunton Spectator*, October 4, 1870.
throughout the Shenandoah Valley in several works. The *Shenandoah Herald* proclaims that there was a general consensus that the flood was more destructive than the years of war, in an area where six years earlier Ulysses S. Grant had mandated that hard war would be waged to an extent that “…crows flying over it for the balance of this season will have to carry their provender with them…” The article explains, “From the general account of the late flood in Virginia we learn of the greatest destruction of the crops and property generally, scarcely equaled by the ravages of the late war.” In an appeal for aid, the *New York Times* eloquently stressed, “The Valley of Virginia is ravaged as cruelly as though fire and sword had once more visited it; along the James and the Potomac, there is such distress as has not been since the dark days of the rebellion.” Although it is possible that the war reference was used as a mechanism for eliciting empathy, the accounts of the damage indicate that the dire situation was not overstated. Many farms, mills, and other industries had only recently recovered and would have to rebuild once again after the flood waters receded. Consequently, the economic burden for some was too much to endure and caused several affected residents to relocate to other areas, file bankruptcy, or sell parcels of land.37

As the storm waters moved north, the flood extended its reach into the heart of Rockingham County. Near Port Republic, the freshet was so swift and widespread that it forced six people, including an unnamed African American family of five and a Mr. A.L. Wagner, into a single tree where they remained for twenty hours before the water abated enough to allow rescue. The African American family had been forced into the tree after

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35 Letter from Ulysses S. Grant to Henry W. Halleck (July 14, 1864)
36 “The Late Flood,” *Shenandoah Herald*, October 6, 1870.
37 I have located a few specific instances of bankruptcy and relocation. However, comprehensively enumerating the economic loss on an individual scale turned out to be outside of the scope of this thesis. The website will continue this work but may never fully locate every instance of loss.
a failed rescue attempt that involved a sinking boat, which had been quickly constructed in an attempt to aid the family’s escape from the floodwaters. Mr. Wagner joined the family in their temporary tree haven after he was separated from his house while attempting to “get some wood” that was only fifteen yards from the door. At that point, the water was rising so quickly that he could not return to his home.

From their perch in the tree, the refugees clung for dear life as the girth of the river grew from about 100 yards wide to be “a mile and a quarter”. By this time the Shenandoah River had already become so full of debris that the people in the tree remained in constant fear “…of being swept down in the current, the driftwood, hay-stacks, and floating houses threatening to bear down the tree in which they had taken refuge.” The swift velocity of the rushing waters made the debris into dangerous projectiles that could easily destroy anything in its path, including the tree that had become a tiny island of refuge for six people.

The preceding account originates from a letter that Senator John F. Lewis wrote to the Rockingham Register. In the letter, Senator Lewis also reveals that he and his family were trapped in their house “surrounded by water four to six feet deep” and were unable to render assistance to those clinging to the tree. He professed that hearing the “cries of the women and children” trapped in the tree and being unable to render assistance “added to the agonies” of his family. The Senator also remarked that on his property alone he “lost over four miles of fencing, five hundred bushels of wheat, between sixty and one hundred tons of hay, five head of fine cattle, between thirty and forty hogs, twenty or

thirty barrels of flour, two or three hundred bushels of oats, and nearly all my corn…” 40

While unable to save the majority of his livestock, his son D.S. Lewis at one point swam to the barn and retrieved eight workhorses and several “very fine thorough bred(sic)” which were housed in their dining-room for the remainder of the flood. Despite the property loss, the Senator, his family, and those that lived on his property, were lucky in that “no human lives were lost on (the) premises…” 41

The account from Rockingham County reveals the stark disparity of how those living with extreme socioeconomic differences dealt with and encountered the flood. It is hard to imagine a more striking contrast than one between an elected U.S. Senator and a family whose name was not even mentioned. 42 Differences of wealth, race, educational access, employment, and notoriety all played a role in how each family experienced the flood, its aftermath, and their ability to express their personal experiences to the world outside of their immediate community. Since Senator Lewis was a statewide elected representative of the voting populace, he was obviously well known and able to easily add his voice to the printed accounts of the flood by submitting a letter to his local newspaper. Conversely, the African American family’s experience was brought to the attention of Rockingham Register readers through a second hand account which failed to even recognize their names. Their marginalization is part of a larger pattern that ignored African Americans accounts of the flood. Although they were mentioned and

42 Senator John Francis Lewis was elected to the U.S. Senate in January 1870, after Virginia’s readmission to the Union. He also briefly served as Lieutenant Governor from October 1869 to January 1870. He was born in Rockingham County at Lynnwood Plantation where he spent his life as an agriculturalist, when not involved in politics. He was elected as a Republican during all of his terms of public service. Prior to the Civil War, Lewis was a delegate to the 1861 Virginia Succession Convention where he was the only member from east of the Allegheny Mountains who refused to endorse succession. As a testament to his popularity, Lewis served a second term as Lieutenant Governor from 1881-1886. He also served as a U.S. Marshall for the western district of Virginia from 1875-1882.
acknowledged as victims of flood events, there is not a single extant, firsthand account that originates directly from an African American source.

Additionally, the physical dwelling locations of the Lewis Family and the African American family reveal a lot about how location and space interacted with socioeconomic status. The placement of their respective houses seems to have fit within unwritten societal norms. As such, Senator Lewis and his family lived on higher ground, which is often consistent with a wealthier status. Conversely, the African American family lived closer to the water in an area that was more susceptible to the flood. Often laborers and working class people lived closer to waterways and experienced higher rates of property loss from flooding events. This is especially true in Richmond, where the majority of loss was experienced in Rocketts Landing which was mainly inhabited by the urban poor, African Americans, and immigrants.

The physical location of the dwellings also provided the two families with varying degrees of choices for how to deal with the flood. Since the African American family was quickly inundated by the floodwaters, they had little time to escape with their lives and did not have the opportunity to prepare for the flood. On the other hand, the Lewis family had the luxury of remaining in their house due to the higher topography. The higher ground also granted them extra time and the opportunity to make choices which helped to save specific livestock. As a result, at least ten horses were saved and subsequently housed in their dining room for the remainder of the flood. This event alone denotes a number of privileges and elements associated with their socioeconomic status, including their extensive wealth which helped to ameliorate the economic aftermath of the flood. Those with greater access to wealth generally fared better than individuals who had fewer
available resources. Without knowing the name of the family, it is impossible to know how they fared in the post-flood world.

Sometimes it took months or years for those affected to recover from the damage. In the case of the Shenandoah Iron Works, the flood caused a thriving industry to shut down for seven months. The Iron Works was located further down the Shenandoah River at what is now the Town of Shenandoah in Page County, Virginia. Here, the Shenandoah River abuts steep rocky banks on the western shore with a fairly smooth floodplain on the eastern shore. The Iron Works was originally built on the river islands and along the floodplain making efficient use of the access to water to help fuel and cool the furnace. Due to the building locations, the full force of the flooded river engulfed both the furnace structures on the river islands and the town on the eastern bank when the water had nowhere else to go. Approximately thirty buildings were swept away, including houses, stables, the furnace, mill and all sorts of property that were swallowed by the river and deposited elsewhere. The river’s hasty ascent caused many inhabitants of the town to escape with only the clothes on their backs. The town and the industry was temporarily left in ruins. According to a company booklet, they were able to rebuild and resume operations during April 1871 by utilizing their available capital and the labor of their localized workforce.43

The force of the flood in this area was strong enough to carry away entire buildings and uproot heavy stationary possessions, including the Shenandoah Iron

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43 Jedediah Hotchkiss, *The Shenandoah Iron, Lumber, Mining and Manufacturing Company of Virginia: a report on its charter, lands, iron ores and other minerals, timber, water-powers, ironworks and other improvements and commercial facilities, and the advantages, present and prospective, offered by it for the cheap manufacture of iron and steel in all their forms, the mining and shipping of iron-ores, the manufacture of articles made chiefly from wood, iron and steel...* (Staunton, VA: “Spectator” Steam-Print. House, 1878).
Works’ corporate iron safe weighing hundreds of pounds. The safe was carried off and not found until early December, even though the company had issued a $100 reward to anyone who found it. When it was found two months later, it was almost impossible to retrieve because it was virtually buried in river sand and flood sediment. While attempting retrieval, the Iron Works lost one of their “best mules” because it was unable to pull it out of the muck and drowned during the process.44

A few miles downriver from the Shenandoah Iron Works, the hamlet of Slabtown was almost completely obliterated, with the exception of one house that was completely turned around on its foundation. At Newport, near the current Page County High School, several houses were destroyed and two thousand bushels of grain were washed away. The losses in this area alone were estimated to be at least $12,000. Several families in both Slabtown and Newport were left homeless and destitute and received little aid to help rebuild their lives.45 While devastating to those who lived there, the accounts of the destruction in these areas only take up a few lines of contemporary newspaper coverage, indicating that there was so much damage to talk about that it was difficult to cover everything that happened.

Continuing down the river, near the current Town of Stanley in Page County, Noah Kite and several members of his family sat down to dinner on the rainy evening of Thursday, September 29th. The sliver of light from the moon had not yet reached the first quarter following a new moon earlier in the week. The dearth of natural light may have contributed to complacency when the creeks, streams, and rivers overflowed their banks

44 B.W.P., “Correspondence of the Page Courier,” Rockingham Register, Dec 22, 1870.
45 Wayland, A History of Shenandoah County, p.361.
later that evening.\textsuperscript{46} That night, Noah and his wife Isabella were hosting two guests at their Honeyville home, their recently married daughter, Mrs. Elenora Nauman, and Mr. Augustus West, a carpenter from Richmond who was in the area purchasing southern bank notes for a Richmond firm.\textsuperscript{47} In addition to their guests, the Kite Family still had five children who lived at home. In total, there were at least nine people who gathered around the table.\textsuperscript{48} Unfortunately, it was the last meal that seven of them would consume.

The Kites lived close to the modern Alma Bridge on Business Route 340 in Page County. Their house, a sturdy dwelling comprised of an original two-story frame structure with a brick addition, was situated on the top of a natural hill and had not been threatened by floodwaters during their lifetimes.\textsuperscript{49} The family was fairly prosperous and well known within the Page Valley. Their farm and milling business had been so successful that a small hamlet had sprung up in the vicinity to accommodate hired hands and workers of the mill.

Since their home had not historically been in danger from previous floods, Mr. Kite believed that everything would be all right and decided not to evacuate. The account from the Shenandoah Valley newspaper claimed, “He(Noah Kite) had seen high water before and feared no danger.”\textsuperscript{50} However, his eleven-year-old son, George, decided that he would prefer to spend the night in the barn. His parents acquiesced to this wish and

\textsuperscript{46} According to The (Old) Farmer’s Almanac, there was a new moon on September 25, 1870. The moon reached the first quarter on October 1. Robert B. Thomas, The (Old) Farmer’s Almanac, (Boston: Brewer and Tileston, 1870), p.24.

\textsuperscript{47} “A Richmond Man Drowned,” Rockingham Register, October 12, 1870. Mr. West is also listed as a carpenter in the 1870 Boyd’s City Directory. It is unclear why he was involved in purchasing southern bank notes. Boyd’s City Directory, p 234.

\textsuperscript{48} There is some debate over the amount of servants that the Kite family had. There are conflicting accounts that mention at least 1 or 2 servants who were on the farm at the time of the flood.

\textsuperscript{49} The Kite Cemetery is situated close to the original house. From the current hilltop location, one can see the Shenandoah River in the distance. See Figure #7, page 61.

\textsuperscript{50} Wayland, A History of Shenandoah County, p.361.
George left the house with Mr. Martin, who worked on the farm. Together they waded to the brick barn with their blankets through water that was “then more than waist deep.”\(^{51}\)

Under the cover of darkness, the water rose with fury. Rain pelted the exterior and soon the inside would fail to be a haven from the elements. Within hours, the first floor of their house was under water. Mr. Kite sat at the top of the stairs with a lantern watching the water rise with such rapidity that it seemed like every minute another tread became covered with water.\(^{52}\) Soon, the second floor refuge was also submerged and the inhabitants squeezed into the garret or attic space. As the deafening roar of the Shenandoah River at flood stage engulfed the house, it was too late for the family to evacuate and all they could do now was hope and pray that the foundation of the house would hold steady.

Close to midnight, the mortar and stones of the foundation and the chimneys began to give way and the house was lifted from its footing. When the house was dislodged from its permanent location, the brick addition collapsed. Then the frame structure was pulled down the river as a floating entity. Noah Kite punched a hole in the roof and started lifting his wife and children onto the rooftop. Isabella, Eudora, Edward, Erasmus, and Ashby all escaped onto the roof before the attic and second floor collapsed likely killing Noah, Elenora, and Mr. West in the process. For several minutes, the roof swept down the river under fierce force, in utter darkness and pouring rain. At a high velocity the roof hit a tree and was smashed into several pieces. The remaining family members were scattered and struggled to hold on. The piece that Isabella, Edward, and Ashby were gripping was swept under the waves and lost.

\(^{51}\) Wayland, A History of Shenandoah County, p.361.

\(^{52}\) Wayland, A History of Shenandoah County, p.361.
The eldest son, Erasmus saw that the piece of roof that he was clinging to was in peril and desperately tried to reach out to passing trees for refuge. By luck, he passed a floating log and jumped onto it. From there he floated several miles downstream, alone in the dark. When the dawn came, Erasmus found himself several miles downriver in the bottom land of Phillip Long’s farm. As the sun came up and revealed the river at flood stage, Erasmus found that he was almost in the middle of the river. Clothed in just his shirt, soaked and exposed to the elements, he remained in the tree for nearly thirty-six hours before floodwaters receded enough for him to be rescued on Saturday morning.

By the dawn of Saturday, October 1st, eighteen-year-old Erasmus had lost his parents, two sisters and two brothers, along with his home and family milling business. In addition, he became the legal guardian of his younger brother, George, and the executor of his parents’ estate. In accordance with the law the remaining personal property associated with the estate was sold at auction only a month after the freshet.53 The shock of losing so many relatives and having a personal brush with death in one evening was visible to all who knew him. Local residents claimed that after the flood his hair began to turn grey and he started to lose his youthful appearance. The psychological strain in this instance manifested in a physically visible way. While Erasmus did not produce a written account of the events in his own words, after his rescue he was greeted by approximately 100 people who listened intently to his heartbreaking tale and documented the occurrence.54 Accounts of the family tragedy were detailed in multiple newspapers across the region and cover about eight pages of Harry Strickler’s A Short History of Page

This specific event continued to live in the public memory of the surrounding area and led to the construction of a memorial near the Kite Farm in 1938.56

As evidenced from the previous story, the floodwaters moved with swift force and carried a lot of debris. In addition to decimating physical structures that lay in its path, it also changed the topography of the land in some instances. According to the *Rockingham Register*, “…extensive portions of the soil of many of the valuable farms on the river front, have been swept off, and the lands utterly, irreclaimably raised.”57 The effects of this phenomenon can be found even today. At the White House, on Route 11 near Luray, the eighteenth century stone and stucco structure was almost completely engulfed by the floodwaters. During recent archaeological investigations in 2013 & 2014, the 1870 flood deposit was found in the stratigraphy surrounding the house. While varying slightly in depth, the 1870 flood deposit in this area is approximately eight inches of sandy sediment that was possibly deeper at the time of the flood.58 This amount of deposit would have been nearly impossible to remove from fields and likely altered much of the landscape adjacent to the river, burying and, conversely, scouring the soil in different areas. It also had a profound effect on parts of the Shenandoah Valley agricultural community, since the altered land surface likely impacted the 1871 crop yields.

Throughout the Shenandoah Valley and northward to Harper’s Ferry, the rivers and streams wreaked havoc as the destruction swept north along the path of the Shenandoah River. At Front Royal in Warren County, several lives were lost when the river reached a height that surpassed all known floods in the area. Here, five members of

56 See Figure #10, page 107.
58 Carole Nash (Personal Communication, August 11, 2015.); Major flooding events have followed & have, in turn, scoured and deposited almost another five inches of stratigraphic material over the past 145 years.
Thomas Blakemore’s family perished when their house was engulfed and moved from the hilltop where it was previously located. Situated about thirty miles downriver from Stanley, the crest in this area took place almost eight hours after the Kite family tragedy. At dawn on Friday September 30th, the water was still rising in Front Royal when the Blakemore family and their guests were caught off-guard by the unprecedented river depth. As the river rose and filled the surrounding hollow, the house was inundated and pulled off of its foundation. The water carried it along as an intact structure bobbing at the mercy of the terrain before entering the main channel of the flood. As it bobbed under the water, those left in the house were completely submerged and struggled for breath. Eighteen year old, J.C. Blakemore recounted years later how he was lifted against the ceiling when the house went down. When the house came back up he “sprang to a window” and swam to a hillside. J.C. Blakemore, who described the tale in great detail, was one of four occupants who managed to find refuge. His brother and two of their guests also survived and together were left to grieve for their six loved ones who perished in the turbid water.

According to the Shenandoah Herald, the flood near this area was reported to be “sixty five feet above the low water mark.” The height of the water reached the fifth story of Weston’s Mill at “Confluence” where the North and South Forks of the Shenandoah River converge north of Front Royal. The intersection of waterways was likely a higher point of water due to the high volume of both rivers. It is the largest

59 Wayland, A History of Shenandoah County, 367.
60 Wayland, A History of Shenandoah County, 367.
61 “The Late Flood,” Shenandoah Herald, October 6, 1870.
62 Weston’s Mill became known as Riverton Mills. The original mill was burned in the Civil War by General Sheridan. The burning is referenced in the Committee of War Claims Report to the 47th Congress. “John Torrey and Others” from the Committee on War Claims, 47th Congress, 1st Session. Report No. 1100, p. 3-4.
contemporary report of high water that has been located. For scale, an image of the mill may help to illustrate the height of the water in the location. Additionally, the water was reported to be at least sixty feet above the low water mark at Riverton Station, about two miles west of Front Royal. The flood reportedly swept “over the top” of the Railroad Bridge which was “about 60 feet above the low water mark” before carrying it off.

Figure 2: Riverton Mills, Front Royal, Virginia

The Riverton Mills building survived the flood even though the depth of the water reportedly reached the fifth floor. Copy of original photograph is used with permission of the Laura Virginia Hale Archives, Warren Heritage Society.

By the evening of Friday September 30th, the flood reached Harper’s Ferry with treacherous, debris-filled water from the southern counties. As the Shenandoah River rose it brought with it sweeping tragedy to the area. The island community of Shenandoah City was completely obliterated and those living in Bolivar and on Virginius

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63 See Figure #2, page 32
64 “Disastrous Freshets,” *Shenandoah Herald*, October 6, 1870.
and Overton’s Island suffered tremendously from the high, swift water. Countless houses and several bridges were swept away. The *Virginia Free Press* declared it, “a scene of ruin and desolation scarcely paralleled by the havoc effected during the late war.”65 One of the few contemporary images of the flood depicts the high waters in this area in the form of a wood-cutting printed in *Harper’s Weekly*.66 The image depicts a single person in a boat attempting to traverse the rocky, turbulent waters surrounding the city on the hill.

**Figure 3: Engraving of the Flood at Harper’s Ferry from *Harper’s Weekly***

Scanned from an original copy of *Harper’s Weekly*, October 22, 1870 edition.

At least thirty-one lives were lost in the vicinity of Harper’s Ferry when floodwaters trapped residents on the occupied islands in the Shenandoah River. When the impending flood was realized, several residents rushed from Virginius Island just before the connecting bridges were swept away. Those who did not evacuate soon enough were left without an escape route. The water quickly rose, and soon Virginius Island was

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65 “The Late Destructive Flood,” *Virginia Free Press*, October 8, 1870, 2
completely submerged “up to the second stories of the houses and their occupants had to be rescued by means of ropes and baskets from the roofs of the neighboring buildings.”  

The location of this island in proximity to the town is important because it provided an opportunity for those who were stranded to be saved. Other locations in this vicinity were not as fortunate.

Shenandoah City, located three miles upriver from Harper’s Ferry, was forever wiped off the map once the flood waters decimated the dwellings and industry that had begun to thrive there. A mill belonging to Childs, McCeight & Co. along with a large machine shop and twenty dwellings belonging to the firm were either damaged or swept away by the water. However, the most tragic event happened when a large brick dwelling, in which five families had taken refuge was swept away with all of its occupants. Three of the families were related and carried the surname Bateman.

The Bateman Family was of African American descent and lived in Bolivar near Harper’s Ferry. According to the 1860 census, the Batemans were a free black family who lived in Bolivar prior to the Civil War. During the flood three related families with the Bateman surname took refuge in an adjacent brick dwelling with the hope that it would provide substantial sanctuary from the flood. Unfortunately, the entire building was swept away and all of the occupants lost their lives. The reported number of people who died in this location varies, however the Jefferson County death record confirmed at least eighteen deaths associated with the Bateman families. Despite their tragic fate, the

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67 "The Late Destructive Flood,” *Virginia Free Press*, October 8, 1870, 2.
68 "The Late Destructive Flood,” *Virginia Free Press*, October 8, 1870, 2.
69 "The Late Destructive Flood,” *Virginia Free Press*, October 8, 1870, 2.
Batemans were marginalized by the flood coverage. Their story was often either erroneously told or barely mentioned.

Although the Bateman’s story was referenced in multiple newspapers, there were several papers that incorrectly referred to them as the “Steadman” family. In an early twentieth century local history of Harper’s Ferry there are only three sentences out of sixteen full pages of 1870 flood coverage that mention the Bateman family even though eighteen members of the family lost their lives.  

In the 1903 book, *The Strange Story of Harper's Ferry*, the Batemans are described as “humble, hard-working people” who were “a good deal respected for their industry and unobtrusive manners.”

The depiction mainly focuses on their work ethic, essentially reducing the lives of eighteen people to a generalized labor description. The succinct nature of the depiction of the Bateman family and their plight is eclipsed by the extensive coverage of white flood victims in the city.

A few miles from Shenandoah City, on nearby Overton’s Island another deadly incident took place. Approximately ten people lost their lives at this location. Their fate was thoroughly recounted in detail in *The Strange Story of Harper’s Ferry* by Joseph Berry. Here, he vividly covers the demise of Samuel Hoff, Mrs. James Shipe, and the Harris Family. The account in its entirety covers several pages and not only addresses some of the individual deaths, but also demonstrates the dire and hopeless situation in which the people who lived on Overton’s Island were placed. The following excerpt helps to demonstrate continued interest in this topic in the Harper’s Ferry area while also showing an interpretation of the plight of those stranded on the river islands, and illuminating the disparity of coverage for different ethnic and socioeconomic statuses:

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...(Samuel) Hoff who, carried from his own door by the current, grasped a small tree and appealed for assistance. Of course, no aid could be given to him, and the poor fellow's voice was soon hushed in death. Shipe said that his own house was the first to give way and that before its collapse he stripped and prepared for swimming. He then put an arm 'round his wife and as the house fell in he jumped with her into the river. Opposite to his house was a water station of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad company, and as this was the most substantial building near him, he swam towards it and endeavored to clutch the wall with one hand while the other was supporting his wife. Several times he caught some projection of the building, but as often was beaten off by the powerful waves that surged around it. At length, his wife requested of him to let her go and to save himself, saying that she was prepared to die, but that he was not. He would not consent, but a large and furious wave soon decided the loving controversy by lifting them up and dashing them against something, thereby loosening his hold on her, when she immediately sank and disappeared forever from his view…

On the same island Jerry Harris and his family also perished. However, their plight was covered in much less detail, likely due to their ethnicity. Berry described how Mr. Harris and his family ran from their house looking for a more secure location. His voice was “heard apparently in earnest appeal to Heaven for assistance.” While he was searching for a secure place, the island was engulfed and in the span of a few minutes all of the structures were swept from the island. Grimly, the book concludes this section by stating, “none of the occupants was seen again or, if the bodies were found, it was by strangers on the lower Potomac, who knew not whose remains they were.”

The flood on the Shenandoah River directly impacted the Potomac and caused it to rise as well. Six miles below Harper’s Ferry, at Berlin, Maryland it was reported that residents were “boating through the streets and flats of their village.” For miles above and below the town, the Chesapeake and Ohio canal merged with the river to become one

76 “Disastrous Freshets,” *Shenandoah Herald*, October 6, 1870.
massive waterway. Although there was damage to the buildings and canal, the majority of loss was agricultural. Corn along the bottomland was completely destroyed. Berlin, now modern day Brunswick, MD, did not suffer like Harper’s Ferry. There were no casualties in this location and the overall damage was minor compared to the neighboring city.

Even though the flood had begun to dissipate, the force of the water was still massive and had not yet run the course of its damage. The final location along this path of destruction is at Georgetown, Maryland, which is now a part of Washington, DC. While the city itself was submerged to 20th Street, it did not suffer longstanding damage. In this area, warehouses on the “Water side” were completely submerged and many boats, barges, and boating houses were “greatly damaged”.77 Here, the freshet is best known for obliterating the Chain Bridge and heavily damaging the Long Bridge, the loss of which disrupted transportation and temporarily eliminated two of the four main crossings between Virginia and Maryland.

Damage to the two bridges received drastically different reactions. The Chain Bridge was considered a necessary entity and received appropriation from Congress to be rebuilt. It was the only structure damaged by the flood for which Congressional funding was approved to cover the cost of repair. Although it took four years to rebuild, due to appropriation and contract delays, when it finally reopened in 1874 the piers of the bridge were raised two feet, a change that evaded future flooding for at least 10 years.78

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77 "The Flood which raged here…”Georgetown Courier, October 8, 1870.
78 Since that bridge fell under federal jurisdiction, the repair required an Act of Congress, appropriation of funds and approval by the Chief of Engineers of the Army. Although Congress appropriated $100,000 in 1872, the final cost of repair was $91,000. "A Quartet of Bridges: Structures Across Which a Million People Annually Pass,” The Washington Post, September 21, 1884.
Conversely, the Long Bridge had been acquired by the Potomac Railroad Company from Congress and was in dire need of replacement. The construction style of the Long Bridge was regarded as “unsightly and antiquated.” However, there appears to be a legitimate complaint, in that, the bridge’s “solid causeway of stone and dirt” was known to disrupt the flow of water and impede “navigation of the Potomac River.”

Several citizens vocally declared that the bridge contributed to greater flooding in Georgetown due to the impaired flow of the river. However, this known issue was allowed to remain and contributed to another flood in 1881. Writers a few years later noted local aggravation in the wake of the 1881 flood and pointed out, “…as the freshet was gradually forgotten the agitation of the matter died out, and the bridge remains as great an obstruction as ever.” In this instance, although imminent repercussions were likely, the private owners of the bridge allowed the infrastructure to remain in its

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79 “The Long Bridge has since…”, Georgetown Courier, October 8, 1870.
80 “The Long Bridge has since…”, Georgetown Courier, October 8, 1870.
precarious state, both susceptible to future damage and potentially liable for future flooding.

From Staunton to Georgetown the flood made its mark upon the land and the people who lived near it, carving out a path of destruction that was reported to be “unprecedented” in areas. However, it is only part of the story. As the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers raged, the headwaters of the James and parts of the Piedmont also suffered from unusually high waters that wreaked havoc along waterways from Lexington to Richmond.

**Lexington to Richmond**

When browsing the local history of Lexington, Virginia, one is hard pressed to find a single mention of the 1870 flood. For those who have written the local history of the town, nineteenth century natural disasters were not a major topic of interest. However, when delving into contemporary sources, it appears to have been a fairly significant event. William Nalle, who was a cadet at the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, wrote a letter to his mother which included a description of the flood. Nalle’s letter amply discusses the damage and reveals what the flood carried off,

…some ten or fifteen houses, some dwelling houses some ware houses situated at the canal boat landing near here all the bridges in the river were carried off and the canal running to this place entirely ruined, all the locks being torn up and carried off. It was a rare sight to see large houses, bridges, mills & every sort of lumber go sailing at a rapid rate, down the river. Up to a week or two since, we could get no mails or anything (sic) that had to come from a distance, and it is still very difficult to get provisions. Mails come and go regularly now, as they have fixed ferries for stages…

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82 I visited the Lexington Public Library and looked through several local history books and sources and did not find any significant discussion of the flood or its damage in this area.

Since the flood impaired transportation and communication while also destroying many of the warehouses in Lexington, it made goods and provisions hard to obtain. This issue affected those living in the area and was a tangible consequence of the freshet. However, due to the timing it also produced a specific dilemma for the town. Almost two weeks after the flood struck, General Robert E. Lee, a resident of Lexington, passed away from the effects of a stroke. When he died, it came to the attention of the town that the undertaker “had no suitable casket on hand.”\(^{84}\) A shipment of metallic caskets had arrived a few days before the flood. However, the warehouse where they were stored was washed away by the flood. Without a suitable alternative, a search was made along the river with the hope that one of the lost caskets could be recovered.\(^{85}\) According to Prof. A. L. Nelson, a Washington and Lee University faculty member, “A youth reported that he had seen one of the caskets lodged on an island a few miles below the town.”\(^{86}\) The island was located below East Lexington after the first dam. Here, the casket had been “caught in a brush pile” and “lodged in the forks of a tree.”\(^{87}\) Two local cabinet makers, secured the casket and made it suitable for use. This incident, while unusual, helps to illustrate the range of influence the flood retained immediately after the waters abated. Here, a national figure was buried in a casket retrieved from the muddy banks of the river. Even though the majority of Virginia went into mourning, the plight of locating a casket for a person of this renown may help to illustrate the difficulty of obtaining certain goods after the flood.

\(^{84}\) “Proof about Coffin for General Lee,” *Confederate Veteran*, XVIII (1910): 422.
While the Maury River raged in Lexington, the rain in central and western part of Virginia and downstream effects caused massive flooding along the James River and its tributaries. The flooding in this part of the state had a devastating impact on towns along the James, such as Scottsville, situated near the river and the James River and Kanawha Canal. It also affected two of Virginia’s largest cities, Lynchburg and Richmond.88 With the benefit of hindsight and thirty years of time, W. Asbury Christian, wrote in 1900 that the 1870 flood was the worst to befall Lynchburg. He asserted that the 1870 flood “was the most destructive ever known, not excepting those of May 1771 and 1847.”89 Other floods of the nineteenth century were excluded from examination even though the 1877 flood had an impact on the canal and infrastructure surrounding Lynchburg.

In Lynchburg, the damage to the city and the surrounding infrastructure was tremendous. Bridges connecting the town to Amherst County were washed away. At least six of the canal locks near Lynchburg were damaged or obliterated. The newspaper estimated that it would take at least six to eight months for the canal to be repaired and that it would cost about $300-350,000 to repair.90 The city also suffered damage to its gasworks and fresh water supply, which left the city in darkness and with unquenchable thirst. Although the city had its share of commercial and infrastructure problems to cope with, it was also faced with domestic loss and death.

A famously tragic tale of death in this area describes several people who became stranded on a bridge outside of Lynchburg after the City was engulfed in utter darkness when the gas pipe across Blackwater Creek was swept away. Several families that lived

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88 In 1870 Richmond was Virginia’s largest city with 54,000 people. The 2nd largest was Norfolk with 14,000. Lynchburg only had about 6,000 people, but was still one of the most populous places in the state.
close to the James River evacuated their houses as the water rose and took refuge on a bridge below the city. Mrs. Ransome, her daughter Lizzie, and servant girl Martha Ward, three children of Mr. Whitlow, Booker Johnson, and an African American mother with three children all gathered together on the bridge with the hope of being rescued by a boat. However, before the boat got close enough, the bridge succumbed to the water and its occupants perished in the floodwaters.

This particular story was mentioned in newspapers across the country. However, out of the ten people who perished, the focus has most often been on Mrs. Ransome and her daughter. Mrs. Ransome was mentioned by name in several newspapers and was likely the most well-known of the victims in this location. There was also a story that mentions a little girl in the dark telling her mother, “Don’t cry; the storm will soon be over; God can see us, and if we are drowned He will know where to find us.” The story has always, unquestionably been associated with Mrs. Ransome and her daughter even though the words were supposedly uttered in the darkness and there was another mother and three children on the bridge who lost their lives as well. Mrs. Ransome’s social status may have been the reasoning for the focus and assumption. However, the unquestioning assumption may reveal another instance of unconscious bias or even racial prejudice. Years later, local author, Mrs. C. J. M. Jordan, would further memorialize it in poetic verse and embellish the tale further. The poem itself does not specifically mention Mrs. Ransome, however, its subjects are specified by W. Asbury Christian, who only mentions

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91 The names and ages of Mrs. Elvira J. Ransom, her daughter, Lizzie, and servant Martha Ward were verified through the 1870 census. All of the newspapers refer to Mrs. Ransom as “Bettie Ransome.” Two local papers, the Salem Ledger and Lynchburg Daily News, referenced Mrs. Ransom as being the daughter of Richard T. Burford.
92 Christian, Lynchburg and Its People, 280. See Appendix, page 120, for transcription.
93 Mrs. C.J.M. Jordan’s verse was printed in Lynchburg and Its People. W. Asbury Christian, Lynchburg and Its People, (Lynchburg, VA: J.P. Bell Company, 1900), 281.
Mrs. Ransome, her daughter, and Willie Whitlow (whose children passed away) in his book. The other seven victims are not discussed at all.\textsuperscript{94}

In the days that followed the flood, the City grieved for the departed and tried to alleviate the needs of those who lost their worldly possessions, as was case for numerous rolling mill workers. The Lynchburg Rolling Mills and the adjoining community that supported its workers was destroyed. The mill lost several patterns and machinery and had to cease operations for several months. Additionally, the worker housing was washed away leaving several families without shelter or provisions. The damage to the mill caused those who were dependent on it as a source of income to be in an especially tough financial situation. Without income, the sufferers who lost everything would have a difficult time regaining some semblance of financial stability. In the \textit{Lynchburg Daily News}, Rev. C.C. Bitting of the Lynchburg Baptist Church specifically appealed to the citizens of Lynchburg to give any “useful” clothing and provisions to help ameliorate the needs of this community.\textsuperscript{95} It is possible that the choice of the word “useful” may have been a reference to the lack of charitable acts in post-war Lynchburg, where the only organized charity event in 1867 was a “Calico Ball” for which the ladies of the city dressed in plain calico dresses for the ball and then donated them to ladies in need.\textsuperscript{96} Although the gesture was surely appreciated, the flood victims required more than a few dresses.

A few miles down the river at Scottsville, the James expanded widely and covered a large portion of the town. One account claimed that it was “the greatest freshet we have

\textsuperscript{94} Christian, \textit{Lynchburg and Its People}, 280.
\textsuperscript{95} “An Appeal for Aid,” \textit{Lynchburg Daily News}, October 3, 1870.
\textsuperscript{96} Tripp, \textit{Yankee Town, Southern City}, 194.
had on (the) James River since the year 1771." According to an eyewitness, the river rose about two feet an hour over the night on Thursday, September 29th. The rain had ceased falling by Friday morning, but the flood had yet to make its full appearance. In a short time, the flat portion of the town from the river to the hill became covered in water. Then, part of the town began to float off. As one account recalled,

…to the horror of the spectators, many of the frame buildings were seen gradually rising from the foundations on which they had been resting for fifty years, and move off with the current. At one time six houses were huddled together in the middle of the street, while the poor widows and orphans and others, who, in sweet repose, had occupied some of those buildings a few hours previous, were gazing, with tears streaming from their eyes, upon the awful scene.

Scottsville lost at least twenty buildings, which floated down the river and “made their final exit” from the town. This location also suffered greatly in their loss of consumable goods. When a lumber house and mill were submerged, the owner lost about 5,000 bushels of wheat. Several other warehouses in this area suffered losses of goods including wheat, corn, guano, and lumber. The Scottsville letter to the newspaper also mentioned the losses of several African American businessmen. While their trades were not described, the census records reveal that Joe Wyatt was a fifty-two year old grocer of mixed descent. Andrew Cleveland was a twenty nine year old shoemaker, who according to the 1870 census had a “real-estate value” of $200. Washington “Wash” Lewis lost his “new store-house and contents.” A few months earlier, he was listed as a

100 1870 U.S. Census, Fluvanna County, Virginia, Population Schedule, taken June 13, 1870, 1. Mr. Wyatt is listed as “mulatto” on the census, but is referred to as “colored” in the newspaper.
The records seem to indicate that there may have been a thriving African American business community in the town of Scottsville. The fate of their businesses after the flood is unclear. The accounts pertaining to Scottsville are revealed through other newspapers and documents, since its local paper was also a victim of the flood.

Scottsville’s local newspaper, the *Scottsville Register*, was fully submerged in the “muddy water” and forced to close for several months. The business of cleaning up the shop must have been painstaking. A letter to the *Charlottesville Chronicle* revealed that the owner was left with “a rusty press and fifty cases filled with mud and water.” One can imagine the time it took to clean and organize the thousands of individual typesetting characters. When the paper reopened in 1871, it had moved to a new location specifically above the high water mark. Unfortunately, the damage to this publication was permanently done and the paper ceased to operate in 1872.

About 30 miles north of Scottsville, at the little community of Rio Mills, near present day Charlottesville, the Rivanna River became a torrent of unstoppable force. The Rivanna is a tributary to the James River that passes through Albemarle and Fluvanna Counties. According to the *Charlottesville Chronicle*, “The mill, store-houses, out-houses, dwellings, &c. were all swept away, not a house being left on the premises.” One of the millers, Mr. Jennings awoke Thursday night, September 29th, and “found the water fast taking possession of his home.” Immediately, he attempted to save his family. Mr. Jennings took his wife and youngest child and attempted to reach the land by

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103 1870 U.S. Census, Albemarle County, Virginia, Population Schedule, taken July 12, 1870, 32.
104 “The Scottsville Register,” *Charlottesville Chronicle*, October 8, 1870.
105 “The Scottsville Register,” *Rockingham Register*, December 8, 1870.
wading. He instructed his other two children to follow them. The darkness of that night became forever shrouded in mourning for the Jennings family when the events took a tragic turn. According to the *Charlottesville Chronicle*, fear struck and the children “…did not heed the admonition of the father; and after reaching land with his wife and child, he turned only to see his house and remaining children swept onward with the rushing waters.”

Mr. Jennings’ neighbors, the Wiltse Family, also suffered from a similar tragedy. Here, also in Rio Mills, three members of the Wiltse family were lost to the freshet. Mrs. Dolly Wiltse and two of her children were carried off when the Wiltse homestead was lifted from its foundation and carried down the Rivanna River. Mr. Henry Wiltse was not in the house when the flood took place and was devastated by the loss of three of his family members and all of his worldly possessions. He lamented, it was “…heart rending for me to see my dear wife and little ones perish in my sight, and no mortal hand could save them.” While his loss was not covered in many of the newspapers, Mr. Wiltse left a detailed account of his plight in the form of a published letter in the *Norfolk Virginian*. It is one of few firsthand accounts written by someone whose house and family were lost to the flood and is an important perspective which discusses both personal loss and the need for aid.

Mr. Wiltse’s letter confirmed that he was not at home when the flooding occurred. Instead, he was forced to watch from a distance while his house, which was in a low lying area near the Rivanna River, was surrounded by water and then carried off with his wife and their two small children. His family did not realize the danger in time and

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109 See Appendix page 123 for transcribed letter
became trapped by the rapidly rising water. According to his letter, his house was “the first one surrounded, but it was not the first that went away.” The force of the current broke his house “to atoms” and consequently he “never recovered anything at all.”

Heartbroken by the loss of his wife, two children, and worldly possessions, Mr. Wiltse went through a period of intense grief and emotional distress. His mental state was commented on in the Rockingham Register after he visited Harrisonburg during late October 1870. The paper reported that he was seen “… wandering listlessly round the streets of Harrisonburg a few days ago, in company with a sympathizing friend.” After recounting his misfortune the paper went on to exclaim, “Is it any wonder that (after) such an overwhelming stroke, his reason should totter on its throne? What is the loss of property when compared with this pour(sic) man’s loss if (sic) all his household treasures?—Alas! how little we know of or care for the miseries of others!”

Mr. Wiltse, himself, acknowledged his extremely distressed mental state and the role that religion played in providing balm for his grief. During this dark hour, he professed, “If I had not asked, and obtained divine help, I would now have been a lunatic.” His statement and the Rockingham Register article provide a small window into the coping mechanisms and support structures that were available to the flood victims. For Mr. Wiltse, support came through religious faith and the assistance of his friends. However, the forms of emotional aid likely varied and are rarely documented in the extant sources.
There are a few other acknowledgements of emotional pain in the aftermath of the flooding. However, most come in the form of brief, external observations and it is generally not reported how those grieving coped with their extreme loss. In the case of Erasmus Kite, his dramatic appearance change was noted by community members. In the wake of the flood as an 18 year-old, his hair turned grey and he began to rapidly age. Mr. Wiltse’s neighbor, Mr. Jennings, was reported as being “entirely broken up” over the loss of his children. Finally, the *Lynchburg Virginian* reported concern that Mr. James Ransome, who lost his wife and child was perceived to be in danger of hurting himself. According to the account, “Mr. Ransom gave vent to the most violent and passionate expressions of grief…” causing some to believe that he was “in danger of committing some rash act upon himself.” Those present then “deemed it proper to put a restraint upon him, and he was taken into custody, to prevent him injuring himself or others during the period of his mental aberration.” He must have been released shortly thereafter because the *Lynchburg Daily News* later reported that Mr. Ransom went to Richmond to identify and claim the body of his wife which had been found in Chesterfield County.

All of the statements are brief tidbits that touch on the emotional pain and suffering, but do not speak to the end resolutions and coping mechanisms available to these people. It is likely that these sufferers relied on friends, family, and religion to ease their pain. However, the only confirmed source is Mr. Wiltse, who in his time of need,

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114 Strickler, *A Short History of Page County*, 221.
116 “Insanity of Mr. Ransom,” *Petersburg Daily Courier*, October 5, 1870. Reprinted from the *Lynchburg Virginian*.
117 “Insanity of Mr. Ransom,” *Petersburg Daily Courier*, October 5, 1870.
118 “Insanity of Mr. Ransom,” *Petersburg Daily Courier*, October 5, 1870.
not only depended on his community for clothing and “a little money”, but also relied on
his religious beliefs and friends for emotional support.\textsuperscript{120} As the torrent that swept Mr.
Wiltse’s house and family away advanced towards its intersection with the James River,
the water contributed to a substantial rise downstream that would have dire effects on the
community of Columbia.

The confluence of the Rivanna and James Rivers is a generally placid meeting of
waterways near the town of Columbia in Fluvanna County. As with other locations along
the flood route, this community was steeped in destruction and tragedy. However, one of
its stories, which told of the attempted rescue of an African American ferryman and his
wife, was picked up by several newspaper publications and circulated among numerous
southern and conservative papers.\textsuperscript{121} Since the Reconstruction Era was a time when
people were forced to grapple with changing racial relationships, it was not uncommon to
see stories that traversed complex racial interactions in the post-Civil War world. During
a single decade, the lives of the majority of United States residents changed dramatically.
Often, these changes were intertwined with complicated emotions, stereotypes, ideals
about identity, and complex racial relationships.

The span of a few short paragraphs provides a window as to how the
predominately white newspaper outlets framed and manipulated a story of tragic death
through the lens of racial interaction. The story describes three white men from Fluvanna
County who attempted to rescue an African American Ferryman and his wife from the
ferry house when it became surrounded by water. In the process the three attempted
rescuers died when their boat became compromised. The story, as it was printed in

\textsuperscript{120} “To the Charitable,” \textit{Norfolk Virginian}, October 26, 1870
\textsuperscript{121} The terms “southern” and “conservative” are separated in this sentence because the story also ran in a
conservative paper from an area that would traditionally be considered “northern.”
newspapers, actually has two forms, an original longer depiction and a shorter tale. The longer story, titled “A Sad Incident” originated in the *Richmond Whig* and was reprinted in the *Baltimore Sun* on October 6, 1870. The *Baltimore Sun* then printed a shortened version on October 7th, with the title “A Characteristic Incident.” The differences between these two articles reveal certain contemporary attitudes about idealized racial relationships through the eyes of white southerners.

The lengthier article, titled “A Sad Incident”, appears to have only been printed within Virginia newspapers and the *Baltimore Sun*. It is more thoroughly detailed and likely geared towards a local audience who may have known or known of the rescuers. This rendition details the attempted rescue of the African American ferryman and his wife by three local white men who met their ultimate demise in the floodwaters. It also mentions the Ferryman’s refusal to be rescued, claiming,

> The house at the ferry, where the James and the Rivanna come together, which has withstood the flood of almost a century, was carried off.  The Ferryman—a colored man—and his wife remained in the house until the water rose to the eaves, without any means of escape. For the purpose of rescuing them Mr. Davis, Mr. Fuqua and young Agee procured a boat and went to the house, but the colored persons refused to get in the boat. On returning to the shore the boat was forced by the current against a tree and apart. Young Agee attempted to swim to the shore, and had nearly reached it, when he sank to rise no more. Davis and Fuqua clung to a tree which they had reached, and supposed they were safe as did those that witnessed the same, but the water continued to rise very fast, and it was soon evident that the water would cover the tree or wash it up. The relatives and friends of those men who had risked their lives so heroically to save the lives of the two old negroes in the ferry house witnessed their perilous condition with the most tedious agony. It was proposed to offer a reward to anyone who would venture in a boat to go to the parties. Very soon $2,000 reward was raised for anyone who would go to their rescue. Two of the Messrs. Hodgren subscribing $500 each; but before preparations could be made the tree was torn up by the roots, and these two heroic men and the noble youth Agee (he was but a boy)

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122 “A Sad Incident,” *Baltimore Sun*, October 6, 1870.
were swept away by the raging flood. The two negroes remained in the house until it was carried off and have not been heard from since.\textsuperscript{123}

This version of the story is particularly compelling because the ferryman was not interested in being saved. The three men, while courageous, attempted a rescue in a rushing torrent of water that ultimately took their lives. It is likely that the ferryman declined their offer for assistance because the ferry house had withstood all other floods during the past century and seemed safer than a small boat on the river. The terminology regarding the ferryman and his wife also changed within the article. When the rescue was attempted the couple was referred to as “colored.” After they declined the rescue, they were referred to as “negroes.” The terminology switch denotes annoyance at their non-compliance and derision at their decision.

In contrast, the shorter article titled, “A Characteristic Incident”, was reprinted in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, West Virginia and South Carolina.\textsuperscript{124} It seems to have been most popular in South Carolina because it was printed in at least three different cities, Columbia, Charleston, and Winnsboro.\textsuperscript{125} The article lauds and memorializes the three gentlemen who attempted the rescue mission, declaring,

\begin{quote}
Among the many striking incidents of the late flood in Virginia is one related by a Fluvanna County, Virginia, Correspondent of the Richmond Whig, of the attempt of the three heroic white citizens of Fluvanna to rescue a colored ferryman and his wife at the ferryhouse, at the junction of the James and Rivanna Rivers. In making the attempt, these three brave men by name Davis, Fuqua and Agee, the later a youth, lost their noble lives. The incident illustrates not only the self-sacrificing courage of a generous and brave people, but the traditional friendship of Southern whites to the colored race. It is an indication of genuine Southern
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{123} “A Sad Incident,” \textit{Baltimore Sun}, October 6, 1870.
\textsuperscript{124} It may have also been printed in other locations, however these are the ones that were able to be located using optical character recognition software and the American Memory newspaper database.
\textsuperscript{125} “A Characteristic Incident,” \textit{The Charleston Daily News}, October 14, 1870.
“A Characteristic Incident,” \textit{Anderson Intelligencer} (Columbia, SC), October 20, 1870.
“A Characteristic Incident,” \textit{The Fairfield Herald} (Winnsboro, SC), October 26, 1870.
sentiment in that regard much more reliable than the inventions of the manufacturers of Southern outrages.\(^{126}\)

Shortening the article and removing certain details was likely an editorial decision to make the article accessible for reprinting with an agenda of promoting southern white benevolence. The ferryman’s refusal to be saved would have undermined the heroic gesture. Additionally, shortening the original article length allowed the author space to insert commentary pertaining to the idealization of southern race relationships. This story from Columbia became a part of the larger flood narrative and helps to illustrate patterns of coverage and interest in certain sentiments.

While praising the self-sacrifice and courage of the three men, the wording purposefully bestows those characteristics on all “Southern whites” as racial traits of “a generous and brave people.” The title itself reinforces this sentiment with its use of “characteristic” to emphasize the commonplace nature of the act. The article also claims that the act of rescue was carried out due to the “traditional friendship of Southern whites to the colored race.” This statement represents a southern white idealized form of race relations in a world where they increasingly found themselves portrayed as discriminatory and racially prejudiced. The article may have been reprinted to reinforce an idealized sentiment which was often missing in the real world. It may have also served as a counterweight to stories of “Southern outrages.” Although there may have been many nuanced reasons for printing this version, this article seems to indicate a white southern need to promote outwardly positive images of racial relationships.

When the water reached Richmond, the lower parts of the city, Rocketts Landing and Shockoe Bottom, became submerged and were heavily impacted by the flood. These

areas traditionally flooded. However, the 1870 flood waters reached a higher depth than generally recorded. The height of the water was enough to warrant commemoration through a photograph and the placement of a 1,000 pound granite and brass flood marker. The Richmond photograph may be the only extant and documented photographic evidence of the flood. It was taken on Main Street in Richmond on Saturday, October 1st. The people of the city gathered here to mark the occasion and visually commemorate the high water. However, before the floodwaters calmed, Richmond was in a state of panic as it watched the James River rise to a height that exceeded the memory of the current residents.

On Thursday September 29th, the City of Richmond was alerted to the impending flood through telegraph messages from Lynchburg. The telegraphs were possibly the first use of the storm signal warnings and were likely associated with the newly installed weather station in Lynchburg that was not quite operational. The #44 station at Lynchburg did not officially start reporting data until 1871 and the first time stations produced a synchronized report was not until November 1, 1870, a full month after the flood. However, there was a Joint Resolution from Congress that passed prior to October 1, 1870, which authorized the Secretary of War to start taking systematic meteorological observations at military stations and other interior locations. Albert J. Myer, the Chief Signal Officer, was tasked with getting support for the measure and published several articles across the country detailing the proposed system.

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127 See Figure 5, page 57
The use of telegraphs in Virginia was cited in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* as an efficient way to warn about an oncoming flood. The message warning Richmond likely resulted from a combination of knowledge relating to the storm signal plan, Lynchburg’s new role as a weather station, and access to telegraph technology. Whatever the contributing factors, the message was cited as an effective use of the new system and was judiciously used to promote the storm signal warning program.\textsuperscript{130} The *Richmond Whig* lauded the telegraph warning and recounted its contents to local readers,

> Never was the practical benefit of the great invention of Morse more strikingly demonstrated then when, of Friday morning early, the telegraph said to the people of Richmond: A mighty and destructive flood rages at Lynchburg, sweeping along, in its merciless, impetuous current, massive bridges, constructed to defy time, large houses, strongly-built mills, fences, trees, lumber, crops, and everything in fact movable left in its way. Prepare quickly, for it is coming upon you with alarming rapidity. Remove the tobacco from your warehouses, your goods in the lower quarter of the city from cellars to elevated places of safety, for nothing like it has been witnessed in Virginia for a century.\textsuperscript{131}

The warning from Lynchburg gave Richmond approximately twelve hours to prepare for the oncoming flood. It is unknown how the news of the impending flood was spread to the citizens, but it is plausible that the police played a role in sharing the news. The Chief of Police called all officers on and off duty from their beats and homes to “prevent disorder, protect property, or contribute to saving that was in danger.”\textsuperscript{132} Although there were active efforts to save property, the *Whig* noted that the river “seemed mockingly calm and innocent” and that many residents found it difficult to take

\textsuperscript{130} “The Storm and the Telegraph,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 11, 1870.
\textsuperscript{131} “The Great Flood,” *Richmond Whig*, October 3, 1870.
\textsuperscript{132} “The Great Flood,” *Richmond Whig*, October 3, 1870.
the telegraph seriously with calm waters and the sun shining brilliantly.\textsuperscript{133} However, there were those who made use of the warning and began moving goods out of warehouses.

As a result of the advanced warning, there were no reported deaths in the city and a lot of personal property was able to be saved. The \textit{Richmond Whig} estimated that property valued at about one million dollars was saved before the flood reached the city. Richmonders were quick to acknowledge the help that the telegraphs provided. The \textit{Whig} reaffirmed the sentiment by stating, “…when we recall to mind what it might have been but for the warning we received, we ought to be thankful that it is no greater, and the more thankful because it was not accompanied by the loss of a single life.”\textsuperscript{134} Many of those who lived close to the river prepared for the flood by moving furniture and personal property out of their homes and businesses to higher ground. One engraving from \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper} depicts people in Rocketts Landing, along the traditional wharf area, engaged in this flood preparation activity.\textsuperscript{135} The advanced warning allowed many of the warehouses and businesses to move their goods away from potentially threatened areas. However, there was nothing that could be done to save the structures that were fixed in place.

When the flood arrived, it came in with a bang in the form of a five-foot wave. The \textit{Whig} provided a grandiloquent description,

\begin{quote}
There was a sudden and startling sound for the water reinforced by the dreadful torrents from Lynchburg and beyond, poured down with a mad and reckless ferocity that portended destruction, ruin, and devastation to everything perishable that dared impede its conquering progress.\textsuperscript{136}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{133} “The Great Flood,” \textit{Richmond Whig}, October 3, 1870.
\textsuperscript{134} The Great Flood,” \textit{Richmond Whig}, October 3, 1870.
\textsuperscript{135} See Appendix, page 114.
\textsuperscript{136} The Great Flood,” \textit{Richmond Whig}, October 3, 1870.
After which the river rose by multiple feet over the course of a few hours. According to the *Whig*, the James River crested at 6:30pm on Saturday, October 1\(^{st}\). As in other places, transportation, municipal infrastructure, and material goods were highly susceptible to damage. Mayo’s Bridge which connected Richmond to Manchester, was swept away. It had been rebuilt after the Civil War and raised four feet during the construction. However, the water was sufficiently high to remove it with ease.

Several houses in Rocketts Landing, Richmond’s James River port and wharf area, were completely decimated. Since the area was warned of the impending flood, residents did their best to remove as many of their belongings as possible before the flood water arrived. Engravings from *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Magazine*, depicted the removal of personal property and flood damage at Rocketts.\(^{137}\) The *Richmond Whig* estimated that, “…some ten or a dozen small frame dwelling-houses in various parts of Rocketts…” were lost.\(^{138}\) Shockoe Bottom was also inundated. Here, the high water mark was recorded in front of the St. Charles Hotel, now the site of the current Main Street Station.\(^{139}\) For those living in Richmond, the flood was perceived as an unusual occurrence which warranted commemoration. The photographer C.R. Rees marked the occasion with a photograph of Richmonders posed in front of the high water along Main Street on Saturday, October 1\(^{st}\), before the flood reached its final crest at 6:30pm.\(^{140}\)

137 See Appendix, pages 114-116.
138 The Great Flood,” *Richmond Whig*, October 3, 1870.
139 Even though it was a known site that flooded several times after the 1870 flood, Main Street Station was built on the site of the St. Charles Hotel in 1901. It was heavily damaged by Hurricane Agnes almost 100 years later in 1972.
140 “The Great Flood” Richmond Whig, October 3, 1870. See Figure 5, page 57
While the James River completed its rampage, those living through it were reminded of a similar flood that took place one hundred years earlier. The May 1771 flood was the largest known and acknowledged flood in the history of Virginia at the time that the 1870 disaster occurred. The 1771 flood seems to draw certain parallels to
1870. While there is little known about the flood west of the Blue Ridge Mountains, recent scholarship which analyzed period sources has attributed the flooding to “heavy and prolonged rain in the Appalachian Mountains.” The 1771 flood was the first major flood encountered by the colonists at Richmond. It was so destructive to the land that it physically altered the landscape Richmond. Additionally, there was a tremendous loss of both life and material goods. According to Dr. Dennis Blanton’s research, over 100 people lost their lives and Richmond, a port city and center of trade for the Virginia tobacco industry, suffered great economic losses. Thousands of hogsheads of tobacco were lost from the Richmond warehouses, causing economic hardships on a scale that prompted the colonists to ask England for aid. The British never actually came through with any monetary aid or relief, an inaction, which further strained relationships during the pre-Revolutionary era.

The similarities between these two flood events are striking. They impacted similar regions, and were both regarded as the largest flooding event in Virginia during their respective centuries. Even the social responses followed similar patterns. Dr. Blanton discussed a pattern of response and change in the wake of flood events in a chapter titled, “The Great Flood of 1771: An Explanation of Natural Causes and Social Effects.” The chapter looks at three floods and concludes that disasters of this sort “appear to seize the attention of most victims only temporarily” and the response is often predictably, the “restoration of access to food, water, provisions, sanitation, shelter, and transportation.” However, in 1870 the immediate response also included the restoration of communication, through mail services and telegraph lines.

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The Blanton chapter asserts that widespread cultural change “is not the usual outcome of major flood events.”\textsuperscript{142} While the 1870 Flood appears to generally follow this model, it also seems to have prompted changes to building practices and infrastructure along the rivers. When comparing the similar levels of the 1870 and 1877 floods, it becomes apparent that the major changes made over the course of the following seven years were successful. Those who had previously lived along the lower flood plains and islands in the rivers began to move to higher ground. Additionally, other infrastructure improvements such as the deepening of the canal, the raising of bridge heights, and creating a more reliable storm signal warning system contributed to lessening the effects of the 1877 flood, which was, by most accounts, a few feet higher than 1870, but caused less damage and death.

The high number of fatalities associated with the 1870 Flood is very important for understanding the flood’s lasting impact and how it altered certain building practices and interaction with the landscape. The flooding along the Shenandoah River in 1870 was the biggest flooding event to occur after the European settlement of the Shenandoah Valley and Western part of the state. It had been many years since the last major flooding event and accounts vary in different parts of the region. In Berlin, MD, a flood in the spring of 1852 was noted as being the most recent “memorable and most destructive one”, whereas the flood on the Rivanna was the “highest experienced since 1807.”\textsuperscript{143} Even with previous flooding events, the \textit{Shenandoah Herald} noted that “it is the opinion of the “oldest inhabitants” that there never was so great a volume of water in the beds of these streams” and that “the North and South Branches of the Shenandoah River were not

\textsuperscript{142} Blanton, “The Great Flood of 1771,” 19.  
\textsuperscript{143} “Disastrous Freshets,” \textit{Shenandoah Herald}, October 6, 1870
known, for the last sixty years, to have been so high.”\textsuperscript{144} As a result, many people believed that their homes were not in danger. To further add to the danger, the topography of the Shenandoah Valley contributed greatly to several of the tragedies. Many of the homes that were lost were situated at the tops of hills and as the water rose all possibility of escape was dashed when the water surrounded the structures like a moat.

When recalling the events of the 1870 in a February 1925 newspaper article Mr. J. C. Blakemore specifically addressed this issue,

It maybe(sic) that there were some people then living and maybe, some yet, that wonder why it was that we all stayed in the house until it washed away. The explanation is just simply this: The banks of the river where our house and mill were situated were much higher than they were a mile or so farther up the river, and just back of our house the ground sloped back to a kind of hollow, and whenever the river rose to a certain height it would overflow the banks above us and run down behind us leaving us as it were on an island.

I was at the time of this flood nearly eighteen years old, and this the only place that I ever knew as my home, and during all these years, I have no recollection of the water ever being up to the house, while the water running back of us was such a frequent occurrence that I do not think any of us ever thought much about it.\textsuperscript{145}

Mr. Blakemore’s explanation helps the modern reader to better understand why so many people stayed in their homes and met their ultimate demise. From a modern perspective, it is hard to fathom living in close proximity to the water since building practices have changed and high water levels have been documented over the course of the past 250 years. However, in 1870 the people living in many of the affected areas had access to knowledge of less than 100 years of flood history.

While the locations of many of the houses that were swept away have been lost, the approximate site of the Noah Kite house in Page County is fairly easy to locate due to

\textsuperscript{144} “The Late Flood,” \textit{Shenandoah Herald}, October 6, 1870
\textsuperscript{145} Wayland, \textit{A History of Shenandoah County}, 365.
the 1938 memorial erected near its original foundation. From this location atop a hill, one gains a better understanding of the topography and distance from the river. Although the river is in sight, it appears to be a generally safe distance from this location. Adding in the fact that it was a particularly dark and rainy night when the flood occurred, the combined factors make it easier to understand why the Kite family decided to stay in their house until it was too late.

Figure 7: A View of the Shenandoah River from the Vicinity of Noah Kite’s House

This photo was taken at the Noah Kite Memorial facing the Shenandoah River. The arrow points to the location of the river across the floodplain.

Additionally, deforestation may have played a role in contributing to the height of the floodwaters, particularly in the Shenandoah Valley. The iron industry in the valley was exceptionally strong at this time and had been growing since the 1840s. Although there are no available statistics on how much land was specifically deforested in 1870,
there are estimates that fuel for an average iron furnace “deforested up to 300 acres annually.”\textsuperscript{146} When combined with 20-30 years of charcoal manufacturing and fuel consumption by multiple furnaces in the region it is likely that the majority of the Massanutten and Blue Ridge Mountains along the Shenandoah Valley were deforested or at least divested of old forest growth to some degree. A webpage devoted to Scottsville’s repeated flooding outright acknowledges that the, “…reduction of timber upriver is a probable factor, allowing rain water to drain off more rapidly and in greater volume.”\textsuperscript{147}

When looked at as a regional event, larger patterns and a more complete picture of the flood are revealed. The combined locations show a pattern of living and building closer to waterways prior to 1870. Without knowledge of the extent to which the rivers could flood during a 100 year flood event, communities were susceptible to higher instances of loss when the event actually occurred. As a result, the damage associated with the 1870 Flood has a correlation to the limited temporal knowledge of environmental history that residents of the area had access to. Therefore, the 1870 Flood serves as a turning point for flood knowledge in some areas of the impacted region. After experiencing the higher level of damage, those living in the region were able to make better-informed decisions about where to build to avoid future flooding.

Knowledge of these changes contributes to the rich historiographical landscape and creates a more complete picture of the 1870s in Virginia. Studying the natural disasters during this era helps to partially explain certain economic challenges that occurred in the wake of the flood. It also allows for a greater understanding of how those


living in this time period though about and distributed aid to the sufferers and engaged with relationships with the poor. Examination of the scale and breadth of regional damage sheds light on the need for relief and how desperate people were for help. In desperation, voices were raised to call for creative means to help the sufferers.
Part 2

Soliciting Donations: Relief and the Brief Attempt to Help the Sufferers

“To you, then, people of Virginia, we bring our appeal to give what you can to relieve your unfortunate brethren.” - The Virginia Legislative Relief Committee, October 26, 1870

The children were buried with their mother. The casket had been built so that the little ones could forever rest in her embrace. Their father, Mr. Henry Wiltse survived the flood with nothing but the clothes on his back. When his appeal for aid was published in the *Norfolk Virginian*, it had been almost a month since his life was uprooted by the rushing water, which swept away his wife, two small children, house, and all material possessions. It was a stroke of luck that his eldest son had been away at school and was spared from the torrent and the scenes of tragedy. They were now the only surviving members of that family. Before the flood, Mr. Wiltse lived in Rio Mills, near Charlottesville, Virginia where he made his living as a miller and had possession of personal property worth approximately $150 prior to the flood. After the torrent took his loved ones and smashed his “house to atoms” he survived off of the goodwill of his neighbors and community through the receipt of clothing, food, and a little money to help ameliorate his immediate needs.

Unfortunately for flood sufferers, like Mr. Wiltse, the disaster occurred before the advent of permanent federal aid programs or professionally organized relief groups. It would be another nineteen years before the Red Cross began to aid in American disaster.

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1 “An Appeal for Aid,” *Norfolk Virginian*, October 26, 1870
2 “To the Charitable,” *Norfolk Virginian*, October 26, 1870.
4 The events of this paragraph are taken from a letter written by Mr. Wiltse which was published in the *Norfolk Virginian* newspaper on October 26, 1870. The information about his occupation and personal property wealth are from the 1870 census. A full transcription of the letter can be found in the Appendix on page 123.
relief and one hundred eight years before the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) came into being. Without flood insurance, social aid programs, and official policies for dealing with disasters, it is important to ask how relief came to the victims of the flood and whether or not there were sufficient efforts to alleviate the suffering of so many people. Additionally, without organized relief groups, who ultimately became responsible for initiating and facilitating charitable works for disaster victims?

While numerous disasters occurred in nineteenth century America, there is relatively little written that is devoted to the scholarship of historic disasters and even less on the topic of disaster relief and aid. Since there are no secondary sources pertaining directly to the 1870 Flood, it is important to look at other events to form a basis for comparison. The Mill River Flood, which occurred in 1874, is an excellent reference for how relief was handled in smaller industrialized communities. The flood occurred after a dam broke on the Mill River, which resulted in a flash flood impacting communities downriver in Western Massachusetts. Elizabeth Sharpe’s book, *In the Shadow of the Dam* is the authoritative work on this flood and is heavily used as a point of reference. A second example, the Chicago Fire, which occurred October 8-10, 1871, almost exactly one year after the 1870 Flood, provides another good source of relief scholarship. This well-known event was massive in the scale of destruction, but took place in a localized area of less than a five-mile radius. As such, the relief effort for this disaster was able to focus on a condensed area and distribute aid within the confines of a single city. While very different in scope, discussing the fire relief helps to provide an additional reference

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5 There is a fair amount of research devoted to the Johnstown Flood, the Chicago Fire, and Peshtigo Fire. However, these events receive the majority of scholarship for 19th century American disasters. I chose not to examine the Johnstown Flood for comparison because it took place nineteen years after the 1870 Flood and had a unique set of circumstances that shaped the relief efforts.
point for understanding certain commonalities of how disasters were dealt with and thought about during the late nineteenth century. Both of these events help us to understand both “normal” relief practices and unique instances of how relief was handled during the aftermath of the 1870 Flood.

The most common source material for the 1870 Flood relief efforts comes from newspaper accounts and letters, wherein representation of voice tends to mainly focus on middle class or elite white men in positions of social and political power. Flood victims are rarely represented. However, the occasional letter describing their plight was published in newspapers. Examples, like Mr. Wiltse’s story, offer a window into the suffering of those whose lives were uprooted because of flood damage. Reports from newspapers, chancery records, and other official records offer names and damage reports. However, few of the descriptions originate from the actual survivors. In the case of Mr. Wiltse, we learn that he had been left destitute and survived through the help of his neighbors. Since most of the aid that was organized through the official relief efforts was not distributed until December 1870 or January 1871, this would appear to be the likely scenario for many in Virginia. Representations of African Americans are normally unreliable and often appear in the form of phonetic style quotes that generally propagate nineteenth century racist stereotypes. Due to the lack of available source material, some voices may not be fully represented. However, this part will attempt to reveal the plight of the working class and poorer people as they sought aid from the 1870 Flood.

Since the flood impacted a large area, including several cities, towns, and rural locations, relief committees were generally called to order for each county and city in the
affected region. Additionally, sympathetic cities such as Norfolk, Virginia; Baltimore, Maryland; and Washington D.C. also contributed by establishing organized relief committees to collect donations. On a larger scale, there was also a statewide legislative committee in Virginia tasked with distributing funds to the smaller local committees. The abundance of committees and interactions between the multiple entities makes the relief efforts for the disaster somewhat difficult to unravel and follow since there were so many people involved and not all of the committees published their work.

When the “Great Freshet” struck in late September 1870, communities and good neighbors rushed to help alleviate the physical needs of those in distress. The immediate focus was on obtaining food, clothing, and material goods. In several cases, people survived with only the clothes on their backs. Since the flood stuck numerous areas during the night, many of the flood refugees escaped in varying states of undress. Although the weather was fairly mild at the time of the flood, cold weather was only a few weeks away making the receipt of warm clothing an urgent health necessity. Food was also scarce for those rendered destitute. Many lost their personal stores of food and without money they could not purchase provisions. Without immediate help, starvation was also a distinct possibility. This particular need was addressed in the one of the first publicized aid plans as a primary concern. General John D. Imboden’s October 4th letter specifically states, “Starvation stares thousands in the face unless prompt assistance and supplies are furnished.”\(^7\) His letter goes on to outline a plan for the purchase of food for the flood victims. Finally, shelter was also a legitimate concern and need, but was rarely addressed within the context of the local relief committees, likely due to lack of funds and resources.

\(^7\) John D. Imboden, “The Late Flood”, *New York Herald*, October 4, 1870.
Although the flood affected parts of Virginia, West Virginia and Maryland, the majority of the damage occurred in western and central Virginia and a small part of the West Virginia panhandle. In West Virginia, Harper’s Ferry and South Bolivar are part of Jefferson County and were the only locations outside of Virginia to receive large amounts of aid through a separate local committee. While the damage there was terrible, Jefferson County was the singular focus of relief for West Virginia. In contrast, the impacted areas in Virginia were geographically spread out and required massive aid distribution on a statewide scale. Monetary aid and provisions were immediately needed to assist those who had lost their homes and livelihoods across the region. Compiled information from the affected area indicates that hundreds of families were rendered homeless in Virginia along with “more than fifty” in West Virginia.\(^8\) It is also likely that many jobs were either lost or suspended due to the destruction of industry and infrastructure.

After wading through the wreckage and seeing the plight of people who lived along the rivers in Virginia and West Virginia, relief committees began to pop up locally throughout the region. While several relief groups have been located through research, this part directs its focus towards a few representative examples, specifically the committees in the City of Lynchburg, Page County, and the City of Richmond. Each location reveals a different approach concerning how relief was handled during the aftermath of the 1870 Flood. The Virginia Legislative Relief Committee is also examined due to its role as the official statewide body for fund distribution. Finally, the citizen’s committee in Harper’s Ferry is analyzed because it was the only committee formed for West Virginia relief and operated independently of the other committees. The interactions between the various committees and their publication of resolutions is important to

\(^8\) “Appeal,” *Virginia Free Press*, October 8, 1870.
understanding how aid was thought about, solicited, and distributed within the affected region.

A Statewide Relief Solution – The VA Legislative Relief Committee

As soon as the extent of the damage was known, appeals for relief began to ring loudly both in the affected region and in areas with close business ties to the vicinity. Virginia’s official plan for relief was derived from an appeal published four days after the flood by General John D. Imboden, a Civil War veteran and prominent citizen of Staunton, Virginia. General Imboden publically appealed for relief in the New York Herald on October 4, 1870 in order to help the thousands of people who were potentially facing immediate starvation as a result of the flood. His plan called for one of the larger organizations in New York City to receive donations and then send them directly to the Virginia Governor’s office. Imboden was in New York at the time of the flood and utilized his business and social connections to draw attention to the disaster.

His public letter outlined a plan of action by suggesting, “Governor Walker can organize committees of members from the devastated counties, who would at once through their boards of supervisors in the counties be able to distribute the funds properly in the purchase and delivery of flour, meal and salt to the destitute families in their midst.” General Imboden admitted that the published suggestions were made without consulting the Governor. His letter states, “I have had no time to correspond with Governor Walker on this subject, but I know the man and know how well and how energetically and faithfully he will perform this office of charity and philanthropy to a suffering people.” Imboden made and acted on these plans from New York after receiving correspondence from his family. Five days later, he wrote to his wife and

9 “The Late Flood.” Richmond Whig, October 6, 1870.
acknowledged the letter by mentioning that she may have seen it reprinted in the *Richmond Whig*.\textsuperscript{10}

Imboden’s private letter to his wife does not confess any personal or political gain. From its wording, he seems to have been genuinely concerned with the well-being of the flood sufferers. If there was an ulterior motive, private correspondence to his wife may have been a secure place to vocalize private ambitions. However, other motivations are absent from his extant correspondence. While professing altruistic motives, it is also possible that he utilized the publicity of the letter as a chance to build personal or political renown.

This method of public charity does not necessarily conflict with the wish to alleviate suffering and was common in the mid-nineteenth century. In *Yankee Town, Southern City*, Steven Tripp discusses how the wealthy elites of Lynchburg “orchestrated several grand gestures on behalf of the poor” that “…enabled them publically to exhibit their wealth, power and generosity.”\textsuperscript{11} The published letter was a masterful public display of generosity that was likely beneficial to Imboden’s public image, bringing him media coverage in Virginia and along certain areas of the East Coast. It was also cost effective because it added name recognition without having to contribute actual money. Imboden’s dearth of personal donations was never publically mentioned and is only known because of private correspondence to Governor Walker.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} *Papers of John D. Imboden (1831-1895) 1937*, Accession # 38-23, 580, 599, 2983, 2983-a. -b, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Virginia.


In regards to potential political maneuvering, it is possible, but unlikely that Imboden sought to embarrass Governor Walker’s Republican administration. Governor Walker won the gubernatorial election in 1869 with the support of white conservative voters who regarded him as a moderate for his lobbying work with Congress to support universal suffrage as part of the readmission terms. The 1869 election marked the end of the radical reconstruction in Virginia. With his support, the Underwood Constitution was passed and Virginia was readmitted to the Union without test-oath and disenfranchisement clauses. While their official party alignments differed, some scholarship suggests that Walker was a “party man in name only”, changing political alliances with prevailing opportunities. At the time of the flood, Walker was fortunate to have a good working relationship with the state legislature, which would start to change in 1871 during debates over the management of Virginia’s state debt.

With regards to aid, General Imboden’s call to action was swift and served to emphasize the urgency of action on behalf of people who were devastated by one of the worst natural disasters that had occurred in Virginia. His actions were likely fueled by his personal knowledge and connection to the destruction. In a letter to Governor Walker, dated October 8th, Imboden reveals that his own family had lost a large amount of property in the flood. While forwarding a received donation, he made a point to apologize for being unable to contribute to the very fund he is promoting because his father and brothers lost “about $2000” in crops. As such, he was already obligated “to aid our old

16 In October 1870, Walker appears to be in the good graces of the state legislature and the general public. He was working to promote his debt plan and at this point it was still being debated. In 1871, things would take a turn when the Readjuster movement started to rise.
parents with all we can share to replace their lost crop.” As a person with social connections, reputable character, and personal knowledge of the damage, Imboden was in a prime position to advocate for those who had lost so much. Unfortunately, it took the Governor and the Virginia Legislature almost a week to respond and organize the formal state legislative committee to collect and administer aid.

During this time, many newspapers called upon their readers to donate to this cause. A newspaper in Tennessee commented on Virginia’s tragedy, “…let us think and act feelingly for those whom an inscrutable Providence has seen fit to so severely chastise.” The Philadelphia Inquirer printed a message of unity stating, “Their sad lot might easily have been ours; The sufferers are really our neighbors, and, in ministering to their wants and relieving their pressing necessities, we will realize the truth of the precept that, “It is better to give than to receive.” The emphasis on neighborly actions and signs of goodwill is an important indicator that Reconstruction America was attempting to shed its animosity from previous conflicts and bitter war.

One of the most touching appeals was printed in the New York Times as an independent appeal for relief. Petitioning their readers, the column declared,

The Valley of Virginia is ravaged as cruelly as though fire and sword had once more visited it; along the James and the Potomac, there is such distress as has not been since the dark days of the rebellion. A calamity like this should be the means of showing that we know no political differences in the presence of distress. The Quaker’s formula of “How much do you sympathize with them?” will suit the present case admirably, and before many days are over, ought to find a response from the wealth and commerce of this State such as will convince Virginia how truly we sympathize with her in this hour of deep misfortune.

18 “The Virginia Disaster,” Sweetwater Enterprise, October 6, 1870.
19 “In a few days out citizens will doubtless be called…” Philadelphia Inquirer, October 4, 1870.
The completely unabashed appeal uses a call for relief in direct correlation to healing battle wounds. The disaster was openly used as a mechanism for putting aside political differences and rebuilding ties between the estranged states. Simple and direct, the argument first calls for using the disaster as an opportunity to rebuild connections. The appeal for sympathy reminds the readers that it could have been them. This sentiment is reinforced by earlier aspects of the article which describe the “elemental might” of water and how the “willing servant of man” can unpredictably “become his tyrant.”  

The necessity to openly call for sympathy and forgiveness is an overt reminder that the war may be over but it was far from forgotten.

Although appeals for relief were openly declared in newsprint, it took several days for an official plan to be enacted. Six days after the Imboden letter was published in the *New York Herald*, Governor Walker took General Imboden’s publicized advice and officially called for the Virginia Legislature to organize a joint committee to collect and distribute aid. By this point, the Governor’s office had already received at least $1600 worth of donations. With all of the unsolicited publicity, there was likely enough public pressure to ensure a committee would be formed. To fail to do so, could initiate a public backlash and the loss of goodwill across the Governor’s constituency. However, without Imboden’s bold move, the fate of the relief efforts would be less certain. Surely, local efforts would have popped up independently, but it seems unlikely that a statewide effort would have been spearheaded. As such, the statewide relief fund was able to capitalize on

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22 Data compiled from multiple letters and telegraphs found in the *Executive Papers of Governor Gilbert Carleton Walker, 1869-1873*. Library of Virginia.
the sentiments of wealthier philanthropists in the wake of disaster coverage, striking while the iron was hot or at least still warm.

The Virginia Legislative Relief Committee was comprised of three Senators and five House Representatives chosen from areas of Virginia most directly impacted by the flood. The choice of committee members was meant to guarantee prompt and fair action on behalf of the affected regions. However, it took almost three weeks after the waters abated for an official plan for relief to be finally released by the Committee. The plan called for localities around the state to set up local relief committees to solicit donations. In areas unaffected by the flood, donations were requested to be submitted to the capital for distribution by the statewide relief committee. The announcement of the official relief efforts took much longer to organize than the independent groups in Virginia and the Relief Committee in Harper’s Ferry.

When compared to the Chicago Fire and Mill River Flood, the coordination of Virginia’s official relief plan moved at a snail’s pace and was rather disorganized. Within 48 hours of the Chicago Fire, a General Relief Fund had been created by the aldermen of the city. However, the Chicago Mayor turned over the official relief actions to the Relief and Aid Society, a private charitable organization, on October 13th which was four days after the fire had been extinguished. Similarly, the official Mill River Flood relief committee took about 4 days to organize. Relief efforts there began closer to the style of the Virginia Flood. Almost immediately after the flood, local groups sprang up to distribute food and clothing. Active fundraising began two days after the flood when

23 “Governor’s Message” and “General Assembly of Virginia,” Lynchburg Daily News, October 10, 1870.
24 “Flood Relief Fund,” Norfolk Virginian, October 20 1870.
Acting Governor Thomas Talbot, who had grown up in the community, gave $200 “to start a relief fund.” Shortly after, an organized “valley-wide” relief fund emerged with a committee of appointed representatives mainly from the wealthiest town. From a timeline perspective, both Chicago and the Mill River Valley were on top of the organizational game when compared to the 20 days it took for the official organization of relief in Virginia.

**Lynchburg Relief**

While waiting for an official plan and leadership from the state government, citizens and religious figures across Virginia initiated relief efforts to serve the immediate needs of the sufferers. In Lynchburg, the call for meetings began on September 30th. However, it took several weeks and meetings before the official local committee was formed. The situation was so dire that immediate relief came through caring neighbors and clergy who worked to obtain donations of food and clothing during the immediate aftermath. The Rolling Mills area outside of Lynchburg, a working class, company-town style community, was in particular distress. According to a letter published in the *Lynchburg Daily News*, “The houses were all flooded, and with one exception, moved from their foundation. Many of the operatives are entirely without money, and the clothing of many was washed away.”

Rev. C.C. Bitting of Lynchburg’s First Baptist Church appealed to the citizens of Lynchburg to give any “useful” clothing and provisions. The newspaper accounts suggest that he diligently worked with the people at

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28 The twenty day figure is based on the published relief letter from the Legislative Flood Relief Committee that explained their delay in fundraising efforts. See Appendix page 124 for transcribed letter.


Rolling Mills to alleviate their immediate needs. Examining the historical context of Lynchburg’s religious institutions reveals how Rev. Bitting was an appropriate figure to undertake this direct relief role.

The First Baptist Church was one of two evangelical churches in Lynchburg that treated laboring whites as “moral and spiritual equals.” The First Baptist congregation fostered an egalitarian environment which voted on church business democratically and rejected class animosity within the bounds of the church. They were also involved with the creation of one of the first African American churches in Lynchburg, African Baptist Church. Their more prevalent egalitarian ideals and ties to the laboring community likely influenced their decision to help the Rolling Mills community. Rev. Bitting’s actions were later publicly deemed successful in a follow-up letter to the Lynchburg Daily News wherein the residents of Rolling Mills expressed their thanks to the Lynchburg citizens.

In general, the Lynchburg Daily News provides excellent insight into the mechanics of forming a local relief committee. Since it was a daily paper, the modern reader gets a play-by-play of calls for meetings and the local politics of alleviating need. Published accounts of relief efforts began with a brief article on September 30th suggesting that the Mayor of Lynchburg call a public meeting “to devise some measures for their relief.” This was followed on October 3rd by the ladies in the city requesting a

31 Tripp, Yankee Town Southern City, 59.
32 African Baptist was created as a separate congregation under the umbrella of supervision by First Baptist as a mission church. During the early 1850s, African Baptist was briefly granted autonomy to manage their own affairs, but reverted to the jurisdiction of First Baptist when there was a concern about its autonomy. Tripp, Yankee Town Southern City, 61-62.
33 “Thanks,” Lynchburg Daily News, October 8, 1870.
town meeting to create “systematic organization.” Mayor James M. Cobbs acquiesced to this request and called a public meeting on October 4th. However, that meeting was postponed until October 5th and only received a small turnout. As a result, the October 6th edition of *Lynchburg Daily News* ran an article which publically shamed the town for its lack of enthusiasm for the relief efforts. This article also implored the Mayor to call another meeting to let the “Citizens of every circle, pursuit, party and faith, meet and exhibit active, practical and prompt sympathy.”

Since the official local committee was taking so long to form, the Lynchburg Mayor’s office became the central location in the city for depositing donations of money, clothing or provisions. It was left for Mayor Cobbs to “place them in proper hands for immediate distribution.” While Lynchburg waited for news of the official committee, the Mayor and President of the City Council called a meeting of ministers from several churches in the city. The meeting took place on October 19th and included clergy from nine Lynchburg churches including, Court Street Methodist, St. Francis Catholic, St. Paul’s Episcopal, Methodist Protestant Church, Baptist Church, Second Presbyterian, Centenary Church, First Presbyterian, and Grace Church. The resulting local committee was comprised of nine men appointed by the aforementioned congregations in Lynchburg.

Conspicuously missing are the prominent African American congregations. Lynchburg did not include Court Street Baptist, African Baptist, and Colored Methodist Church in the committee. It is possible that by choosing predominantly white

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37 “All persons having money...” *Lynchburg Daily News*, October 5, 1870.
38 “Meeting of the Ministers of Lynchburg – Relief of the Sufferers by the Flood,” *Lynchburg Daily News*, October 19, 1870.
congregations, the elite community was exerting and reinforcing a measure of control
over the Black community whose first source of community independence had been
through taking control of their religious organizations. One of the first African American
celebrations of freedom in post-Civil War Lynchburg took place in June 1866 as a parade
to commemorate the “first anniversary of the first black-run Sunday schools.”
Organizing relief through predominately white religious institutions may have been an
attempt to reestablish the bonds of paternalism which often governed Lynchburg’s
charity efforts prior to the war.

The call for intervention by religious representatives was not uncommon and is
frequently intertwined with the 1870 flood relief efforts. The official resolution by the
Virginia Legislative Relief Committee appeals to clergy within the State to take up a
“collection of contributions to the “Flood Relief Fund,” and to solicit the active
sympathies of their churches in swelling the amounts to as large a sum as the members
may feel able to contribute.” The use of religious language in relief appeals also occurs
repeatedly. Themes evoking Christian duty and obligation to those in need exist in almost
every relief appeal.

Once the Lynchburg relief committee was officially formed, the information
about their work became very scarce. Similarly, the Virginia Legislative Relief
Committee published only three main articles during October 1870 and the amount of
overall newspaper coverage regarding relief efforts substantially declines after November
1, 1870. According to Tripp, the Lynchburg News reported that the relief organization has

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39 Tripp, Yankee Town, Southern City, 181.
40 “Flood Relief Fund,” Norfolk Virginian, October 20, 1870.
only raised “a small amount ...for distribution” to the poor. At this point in time, Lynchburg’s charities were at a crossroads which was forcing them to rethink traditional monetary charity. According to Tripp, many of the church standing relief funds were broke and attempting to find new ways to help the poor. The paternalism and personalism that once existed in Lynchburg’s charity structure was significantly altered after the war due to “financial constraints and the emergence of a more competitive and impersonal economic structure.”

A few newspapers continued to cover the relief distributions sporadically. However, the publication of relief measures in Virginia was hit and miss and the complete opposite of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society. Their published special report included their general mission statement, act of incorporation, all committee proceedings, donations and distributions. While it was written by the committee and for all intents and purposes included no real oversight, it did make relief numbers available for public scrutiny and reveal that Chicago’s relief effort was much more organized and sophisticated than the official measures in Virginia.

The only official publication of donation amounts collected by the Virginia Legislative Relief Committee appeared in newspapers around October 26, 1870. Their official “Appeal for Relief” acknowledged five fairly large monetary donations which

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41 Tripp, *Yankee Town, Southern City*, 194.
42 Tripp, *Yankee Town, Southern City*, 194.
43 Tripp, *Yankee Town, Southern City*, 211.
44 Tripp, *Yankee Town, Southern City*, 204.
amount to $3,150.00 total. This sum was in no way sufficient to alleviate the suffering of thousands of people in Virginia. In contrast, the Chicago relief report acknowledged that 14,137 families were receiving aid in the city on November 18, 1871 with a total amount of contributions listed as $3,418,188.20. While the Chicago committee also reported a deficit of $558,310.34, historian Karen Sawislak argues that the committee actually ended their relief efforts with a surplus of monetary donations that they chose not to distribute and returned to their general operating budget. Whether or not the Chicago committee actually had surplus funds, it is apparent that they were much better organized than the Virginia Legislative Relief Committee and deftly managed to incite sympathy and open wallets.

If the Chicago Aid and Relief Society’s reported contributions are divided by the number of families they were serving in November 1871, it appears that the average family could have received approximately $241.79 per family. The Society was also paying salary to 643 employees, which removed $9,758.98 from their operating budget on a weekly basis, revealing the extent of organizational capital. By comparison, if a low estimate of at least 300 now-homeless families in Virginia received the same amount of aid, the state would have needed to raise at least $72,537.

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46 The official reported number is actually wrong. After viewing the donation letters which Gov. Walker saved, this number should be $3,600. The inaccuracy comes from only attributing $50 to T.P. Branch, who was the first donor and generously gave $500, not $50. Unfortunately, this is not a simple typo in a singular newspaper, but actually found in the committee’s official letter to the public and aggregated as “$3150.” This could be a simple oversight, but more likely seems indicative of the carelessness of the committee. To be incorrect when reporting five donations seems to be a glaring error. By the Governor’s own papers, the committee only raises a total of $4569.27, only about $1000 more after they released their final appeal for aid.

47 In 2013 dollars this equates to approximately $56,250.00

48 Chicago Relief and Aid Society, Chicago Relief, 13.

49 Sawislak, Smoldering City, 119.

50 Chicago Relief and Aid Society, Chicago Relief, 17.
This could have been a feasible task. The Mill River relief fund raised about $93,000, but had an active relief committee that began soliciting donations four days after the disaster. When the official statewide relief committee for Virginia announced a plan of action it was already twenty days after the flood and momentum was falling. Since Virginia Legislative Committee only raised a reported $3,150.00 during the first month, it became increasingly unlikely that they would come close to being able to procure a large amount of money to aid the 1870 flood victims. In the end, the Governor’s office received a total of $4569.27. Although there were some institutions and groups that donated funds and goods directly to the respective localities, it is clear that the relief efforts fell short. If sufferers relied only on the known donations to the statewide relief fund, they would have received an average a minor allotment of approximately $14.93 per family from the Virginia Legislative Relief Committee. In actuality, distributions could be far less, as revealed in Page County, Virginia.

**Page County, Virginia - Relief Distributions**

Page County, Virginia located in the Shenandoah Valley, was one of the hardest hit locations in the state. Several lives, businesses, homes, material possessions, and acres of crops were lost. The total number of dwellings that were destroyed in this area is unclear. The *Page Courier* mentioned by name at least nine families that lost houses in the flood. However, the newspaper also made several vague comments such as “…all houses immediately on the river were either badly damaged or washed away.” While the full amount of damage is not known, it is likely that at least thirty-six dwellings were

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51 Total amount was compiled from Gov. Walker’s executive papers. *Governor Gilbert C. Walker, Executive Papers, 1869-1873, Accession 40233. State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.*

lost in the county. Although there was significant damage to businesses and other sources of livelihood, the relief committee appears to have directed monetary and tangible good donations to those who physically lost their homes, personal material possessions, and food stores.

Since the flood was one of the worse natural disasters to impact the area, it was a topic of interest for the local newspaper for several weeks. As a result, the Page County Relief Committee was one of the best in the state for publishing detailed relief accounts of both receipts and distributions on a monthly basis. Their published accounts reveal that Page County as a whole only received $707.60 in total monetary donations, including $355.91 from the Virginia Legislative Relief Fund. While each person who received a distribution was not listed by name, those that received material goods in the Springfield Township were acknowledged in the newspaper with a full account of their donated items. In this location sixteen households were granted some measure of relief ranging from $5 in cash to an assortment of material goods.

Page County’s material donations were given by the Committee of Corn Exchange in Alexandria, Virginia. The Committee of the Corn Exchange also provided donations to Warren County “in the form of money, clothing, and furniture” and may have specifically been active in the Shenandoah Valley relief efforts due to economic ties to the region. The majority of the items provided by the Corn Exchange to Page County residents were bolts of cloth used to make clothing, bedding, and blankets. They also

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53 My estimate includes the 9 families mentioned by name, along with the addition of at least five houses in the Town of Shenandoah, Slabtown and the sixteen families who received relief in Springfield. I am also including the attribution of one African American woman’s trip down the Shenandoah River in her cabin. Several articles mention that she was from Page County, but it is inconclusive since her name was never disclosed.

provided cutlery, household goods, and basic foodstuffs. Although the provision of material goods was a generous act, the need was so great that it only began to ameliorate the loss. The relief allotment for Mr. Peter Bixler provides a good example of the amount of formal assistance that was received in this area. Mr. Bixler was mentioned by name in the *Page Courier* as losing his entire house and worldly possessions. According to the 1870 census, he was a seventy-four year old shoemaker who lived with his wife Susan, and cared for their eleven year old grandson, Peter Glenn.\(^{55}\) When relief came to Mr. Bixler, he was given,

1 comfort, 2 blankets, 9 yds ticking, 7 ½ yds sheeting cotton, 8 yds sheeps gray, 1 tea-kettle, 1 coffee mill, 1 bed mug, 6 ½ cotton flannel, 1 spool boss, 1 bunch thread, 1 dozen buttons, 3 yards brown cotton, 6 plates, 3 cups, 3 saucers, 1 dish, 1 bowl, 1 paper sugar, 1 do. coffee, 1 hat, ½ dozen buttons.\(^{56}\)

It is worthy to note that the distribution committee paid close attention to household needs and provided the Bixler family with exactly three cups and saucers, one for each member of the household. For those who received distributions of material goods, monetary disbursements ranged .50 cents to $10, with some like Peter Bixler only receiving physical goods.\(^{57}\) It took about two months for goods and money to be received and distributed. The relief committee acknowledged the receipt of physical goods and a limited amount of money on November 27, 1870.\(^{58}\) Therefore, the distribution took place

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\(^{55}\) 1870 U.S. Census, Springfield Township, Page County, Virginia, Population Schedule, taken July 5, 1870, 44. Peter Glenn was likely the son of Emma Bixler Glenn and Mark Glenn who were married Feb 6, 1855 in Page County.

\(^{56}\) "Distribution by the Relief Committee," *Page Courier*, December 16, 1870.

\(^{57}\) "Distribution by the Relief Committee," *Page Courier*, December 16, 1870.

\(^{58}\) "Letter to Page Courier," *Page Courier*, December 2, 1870.
sometime between November 27\textsuperscript{th} and December 16\textsuperscript{th} when the distributions for the Springfield Townships were recorded in the \textit{Page Courier}.\textsuperscript{59}

\textbf{Figure 8: A Modern Representation of Peter Bixler’s Relief Allotment}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image8.png}
\caption{A visual representation of Peter Bixler’s relief allotment. The items are representative. It is nearly impossible to provide complete accuracy based on the newspaper description. A further discussion of the items used in the image can be found in the Appendix on pages 116 & 117.}
\end{figure}

Mr. Bixler’s relief distribution was one of the larger allotments. Although he did not receive any money, he was given a sizeable amount of physical goods from the Committee of the Corn Exchange. From this example and the other Page County distributions, it becomes apparent that the donations obtained by the Legislative Relief Committee were absolutely insufficient. Without the efforts of the Corn Exchange, the sufferers in the county would have been in a dire state. The Virginia Legislative Relief Committee acknowledged the deficit of funds in their October 26\textsuperscript{th} appeal for relief. The total amount of donations received was a much smaller amount than expected. Two of the

\textsuperscript{59} “Distribution by the Relief Committee,” \textit{Page Courier}, December 16, 1870.
potential contributing causes of the reduced amount of donations were inflated donation reports and the delay in active fundraising due to the statewide mourning following the death of General Robert E. Lee on October 12, 1870.

**Inflated Donations and the Death of General Robert E. Lee**

The Virginia Legislative Committee’s official “Appeal for Aid”, published in various newspapers around October 26, 1870 acknowledges the distraction that mourning caused for the entire state. Although the Legislative Relief Committee’s membership and structure was finalized on October 10th, their charitable work ground to a halt two days into their work when Lee’s death was announced. The first few paragraphs of their Appeal for Relief reference the devastation and intense mourning that occurred within Virginia. The scale of grief was evidently sufficient to cease all relief work for the destitute to allow time to mourn. The Committee eloquently stated that they,

> …had scarcely assumed their duties when the hearts of the people, already sore and bleeding from their recent afflictions, were stricken with overwhelming anguish by the announcement of the death of General Lee. While the corpse of her best beloved son lay cold upon her bosom, the State could not bethink her for the time of the her bereavements of her children, and all other tasks were laid aside, all other griefs forgotten, that we might commune and mourn together in our common sorrow, and do honor to our illustrious dead.\(^6^0\)

From their statement, the intense mourning for General Lee appears to have diverted the official committee from their duties to the poor and destitute from approximately October 12\(^{th}\)-October 26\(^{th}\).

The scale of mourning was immense and reflected in every newspaper regional consulted. Several cities, including Richmond, Norfolk, and Lynchburg ceased business

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\(^6^0\) “An Appeal for Aid,” *Norfolk Virginian*, October 26, 1870.
for the day when news of his death arrived.\textsuperscript{61} Lexington, Virginia, where Lee resided, actually ran out of black cloth from draping the city in visible mourning. In response, newspapers across the state devoted several columns or even pages to remembrances of General Lee. There was also a visible change in story prominence as the remembrances and calls for a memorial fund to place a statue in Richmond eclipsed the appeals for aid and relief.

When one looks through Governor Walker’s Papers most of the large, individual donations occur before October 15\textsuperscript{th}. A few donations that involve community collections are received after this point, such as the City of Norfolk collecting almost $650, however the majority of the fundraising was completed within a few weeks after the flood. Grief and a shift in story prominence appear to have contributed to the derailment of official relief fundraising in Virginia.

In addition to grief, an erroneous report of extravagant donations from New York organizations also circulated in newspapers across Virginia during this time. The report appears to have originated in the \textit{Baltimore Sun} on October 10, 1870. It is brief but states, “The Stock Exchange has given $25,000 to the sufferers by the Virginia floods, the Gold Exchange $10,000, and the Merchants and Brokers’ $15,000 more.”\textsuperscript{62} The idea that rich entities covered the cost of relief may have led some potential donors to abstain from individually participating in relief efforts, especially if potential donors had little expendable money.

Newspapers never revealed to the public that the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) report was completely false. The minutes of the New York Stock Exchange

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} “Norfolk Mourns Departed Hero,” \textit{Norfolk Virginian}, October 14, 1870.
\item \textsuperscript{62} “New York Subscriptions to the Virginia Sufferers,” \textit{Baltimore Sun}, October 10, 1870.
\end{itemize}
Governing Committee reveal that they received a request to aid to the Virginia and Harper’s Ferry sufferers. The request was considered on October 7th and adopted for further discussion with 129 ayes and 65 nays. The Governing Committee revisited the matter on October 12th and concluded that a donation would violate a resolution passed earlier in the year which concluded “that it was inexpedient to entertain any applications for donations from any source, other than that of relief for members of the New York Stock Exchanges and Whereas the condition of the finances of this institution and its contemplated expenditures do not warrant the Committee in departing from the rule then adopted.”\(^63\) It was therefore resolved that the NYSE would respectfully decline the request for aid as an organization.

In the same article from the *Baltimore Sun*, the Gold Exchange and the Merchants’ Exchanges were reported to have given $10,000 and $15,000, respectively, to the cause. This claim is at least partially erroneous since a letter in Governor Walker’s Papers confirms that the Gold Exchange donated $2,000, not $10,000.\(^64\) The *New York Times* also publically noted that the $2,000 donation was unanimously supported in a Gold Exchange vote on October 6th and reconfirmed the information in another article several days later. Additionally, there are no records which indicate that the Merchants’ Exchange donated any amount to the cause. As such, it appears that only $2,000 of the reported $50,000 donation was actually received. This overblown total could have had dire implications for fundraising, causing several localities not to engage in relief efforts.

Additionally, included in the singular donation from the Gold Exchange was a request for

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the money to be split between Virginia and West Virginia. The request was worded so that Governor Walker could use his discretion and judgment as to where the money would be best spent. It is likely that Harper’s Ferry received little, if any, of the funds from this donation since they were already in the process of being forever severed from Virginia.\(^\text{65}\)

**Relief in Harper’s Ferry**

The Harper’s Ferry Relief committee was comprised of several prominent local businessmen. The committee was called into action on October 8, 1870 with the explicit purpose of attending to the needs of the poor who escaped the flood. The committee was proactive in their solicitation of donations and immediately contacted larger metropolitan areas, such as Baltimore, Maryland and New York. Their efforts were judiciously rewarded. By October 15\(^\text{th}\), the committee had received $1679.55 in cash donations along with several clothing and food items.\(^\text{66}\) The amount received is more than half of what the Virginia Legislative Relief Fund raised by October 26\(^\text{th}\). There was also a Ladies Committee that raised $200 by October 15\(^\text{th}\). The committee worked with haste and reported on October 25\(^\text{th}\) that all received money and goods had been distributed. Since they acknowledged that not all of the needs had been met, they stated that more aid was needed and would be accepted by any of the Ladies on the committee.\(^\text{67}\) The larger relief committee did not disclose the distribution of their funds or goods. As a result, some members of the community became concerned and all called for immediate publication of the full receipts and distributions.

\(^{65}\) Technically, this region of West Virginia was still under litigation to determine if they could legally separate from Virginia. The case was under review at the Supreme Court, but a final decision was not handed down until 1871.

\(^{66}\) “Relief for the Sufferers,” *Virginia Free Press*, October 15, 1870.

\(^{67}\) “Ladies Relief Meeting,” *Virginia Free Press*, October 29, 1870.
A public meeting was called on December 15th to address questions about the distribution of aid. A local businessman, John W. Neer, was chosen to serve as President of the counter-committee. The meeting called for the Relief Committee to prepare an account of their contributions and disbursals for publication in the newspaper. Their disgust with the lack of action was apparent and they called for immediate resolution by stating, “…this is deemed such an important duty on their part as cannot be avoided without imminent disgrace.”68 When several weeks passed without acknowledgement of their inquiry, a rather odd incident occurred. Instead of following up in the two papers which ran the initial inquiry, minutes of the counter-committee were submitted for publication in the *Baltimore American* newspaper.

The article was pointedly titled, “The Disaster at Harper’s Ferry -What has become of the Relief Fund?” and placed a second request for relief disclosure, noting that it had been over a month since the previous request. The meeting claimed that several citizens who were affected by the flood “have received nothing from these contributions” and wished to know what happened to the fund. The proceedings then called out the Relief Committee members by name and accused them of misappropriating funds. In scathing language the counter-committee claimed,

That the general and current rumors that several gentlemen of Harper’s Ferry have received large sums of money, subscribed and designed for the relief of all sufferers by the flood, be inquired into, for the reason that said sums of money are in like manner reported to have been converted to the personal use of the persons whom it was transmitted, and has never reached the beneficiaries.69

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The counter-committee went one step further by threatening legal action against the Harper’s Ferry Relief Committee. They retained A.M. Kitemiller, attorney-at-law, to “represent the people, in all matters connected with this subject.” Kitemiller was also listed as the secretary for this meeting and as such was authorized to publish the proceedings. Once published, further intrigue ensued by way of the Shepherdstown Register.

The Shepherdstown Register expressed disapproval at the actions of the counter-committee and was pleased to run a retraction of the “serious and damaging charge.” The article in the Baltimore American must have served its intended purpose to cause outrage and elicit a response from the Harper’s Ferry Relief Committee. However, the response may have been more than John W. Neer had bargained for. Following the report, Neer and others in the counter-committee signed a paper “retracting the language attributed to them in the resolution, which, they say, were prepared and published without their knowledge and consent.”

While it is possible that the later report was published without their consent, the form of publication included resolutions, which appear to have been voted upon within a committee setting. The public questioning of the actions of the business elite and leaders of Harper’s Ferry may have caused severe backlash and repercussions for the counter-committee. While their motivations for retracting the statement may never fully be known, the public dissent calls into question the overall responsibility of the Relief Committee. It is fully possible that the Relief Committee did their duty to the citizens of

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70 “The Disaster at Harper’s Ferry – What Has Become of the Relief Fund?” Baltimore American, January 16, 1871. Kitemiller is likely a misspelling of Kitzmiller. There was an Archibald M. Kitzmiller who was the chief clerk to the superintendent of the armory at Harper’s Ferry in 1860.

71 “Harper’s Ferry,” Shepherdstown Register, January 28, 1871.

72 “Harper’s Ferry,” Shepherdstown Register, January 28, 1871.
Harper’s Ferry, but refused to publically publish distributions. However, without the public accountability of the distribution list, their actions remain unknown and shrouded in doubt.

The public dissent about the distribution of funds in Harper’s Ferry shares similarities with the elite-run relief efforts of both the Mill River and Chicago communities. Mill River’s relief efforts began with an attempt to nominate representatives from each town, but ended with the normal handful of wealthy elites from Northampton.\(^73\) Their relief efforts ended up being lorded over by a finance committee run by the reservoir company who had final say about relief expenditures.\(^74\) The Chicago Relief and Aid Society was led by a group of elite businessmen who subscribed to a relief ideology which believed that the working class should not become dependent on charity or alms.\(^75\) The threat of dependency could lead to social disorder and upheaval and was to be avoided at all costs. According to Sidney Gay, a former director of the Relief Society, if relief was not distributed properly, “the laboring people of Chicago, instead of being cheerfully at work at good wages, would have been at this very moment a starving, discontented, turbulent population.”\(^76\)

The Relief Society felt it had a duty to uphold social order and deemed it acceptable to withhold aid from those who they found unfit. Their method of distribution was met with dissent in a published letter to a Chicago newspaper. The writer claimed that the Chicago Relief and Aid Society “failed to do what they agreed to do by taking care of suffering humanity.” Further, “millions from all parts of the globe have sent their

\(^{73}\) Sharpe, *In the Shadow of the Dam*, 121.
\(^{74}\) Sharpe, *In the Shadow of the Dam*, 122.
\(^{75}\) Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 85.
\(^{76}\) Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 71.
donations here to relieve those in distress, and not to be hoarded and lorded over by a set of men whose sympathies are foreign to the task at hand.”\textsuperscript{77} The writer of this article shared similar opinions with the Harper’s Ferry counter-committee. While relegated to a much smaller scale, those in Harper’s Ferry in need of assistance were at the mercy of the judgment of the wealthy elite. Without oversight and published accounts of their works, it is understandable why the public would have been concerned with the livelihoods of so many people at stake.\textsuperscript{78}

\textbf{Richmond, Virginia}

Richmond’s response to the flood was significantly different from all other impacted locations. In contrast to other parts of the state, the City of Richmond was the only impacted location that did not have a dedicated relief committee that solicited donations for local sufferers or the statewide Legislative Relief Committee. The reasons why Richmond did not form a local relief committee are unclear. However, it is likely due to multiple factors including the circumstances surrounding its flood warning and preparation, prevalent social theories pertaining to aid, and overall lack of funds. A combination of these factors in varying degrees likely influenced the way that relief was thought about and executed in Richmond at this time.

Although many people lost homes and property in the city and in Manchester on the Chesterfield County side of the James River, there is no recorded loss of life in this

\textsuperscript{77} Sawislak, \textit{Smoldering City}, 71.

\textsuperscript{78} The President of the counter-committee, John W. Neer, was a local businessman in Harper’s Ferry who had a stake in the relief efforts. According to local historian Robert H. Moore II, Neer lost his $3,000 lumber business in the flood and was unable to financially recover. He would eventually declare bankruptcy and have to leave the city. For more information see, “Did People Call Him a Union Man?” “Yes sir, and a great many called him a damn Yankee all the time.” http://cenantua.wordpress.com/2012/07/07/did-people-call-him-a-union-man-yes-sir-and-a-great-many-called-him-a-damn-yankee-all-the-time/
The advance warning that saved the lives of the citizens also allowed many residents and business owners to move material goods out of the reach of the flood waters, greatly reducing the overall loss to the city. However, even with the benefit of preparation, the *Richmond Whig* and the *Richmond Dispatch* estimated that material losses solely to local businesses in the city aggregated to approximately $42,275 and $54,100 respectively. These figures are based on the printed lists of estimated losses to individual merchants which ran in the local newspapers.

Although merchants along the Shockoe Bottom and lower parts of the city suffered monetary and material good loss, there was also quite a lot of domestic and mercantile damage in the Rocketts Landing and Manchester areas. The *Richmond Dispatch* noted, “Rocketts suffered perhaps more than any other part of the city.” Even though this area was both an active wharf and domestic location, the newspaper coverage often glosses over the specifics pertaining to the domestic loss. A methodical account of damaged dwellings or domestic sufferers was not reported in either the *Richmond Whig* or the *Richmond Dispatch*, which significantly contrasts with their coverage of merchant losses wherein both papers devoted several column inches to listing specific names and damage amounts for businesses in the area.

The few sentences devoted to the domestic losses in the *Richmond Whig* reveal that an estimated twelve to twenty houses in the Rocketts vicinity and several houses in Manchester were carried away by the flood waters. In contrast, the *Richmond Dispatch*

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79 Manchester is now a part of the City of Richmond. However, in 1870 it was still a part of Chesterfield County. It is directly across the James River on the other side of Mayo’s Bridge. Although it would not likely have qualified for city sponsored aid, if there was a local committee they would have likely benefited.
did not report a number of lost dwellings, but commented that “no houses of value in and around the town have been swept away.”83 The language of this phrase is dismissive to the residents of Rocketts whose homes held personal value. The derisive commentary is somewhat echoed in the Richmond Whig with the reporting, “…at least twenty families in this unfortunate locality alone had their homes and contents swept completely away by the flood, and yesterday saw only bare grounds where three days before they boasted what they called homes.”84 It may have been an unintentional slight. However, during this time of aftermath, the commentary of both papers was focused on the monetary value and quality of housing that the residents had before the flood, but excluded an expression of how to ameliorate the loss after their dwellings, possessions, and livestock were swept away.

The Rockets Landing area of Richmond was mainly inhabited by African Americans and immigrants, many of whom survived on very limited means. The discussion of their losses is often accompanied by lightly veiled or even overt racism. Although Rocketts was acknowledged as the place that received the most destruction in Richmond, none of the sufferers were mentioned by name except Landrum Henderson, who actually lived on the Manchester side.85 Mr. Henderson’s plight is referenced in both the Richmond Whig and the New York Herald. In the Herald, he is referred to as a “well-to-do negro” who “had just erected a handsome residence and furnished it in a style magnificent for one of his race.”86 The article then describes the destruction of his house

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83 “Miscellaneous” Richmond Dispatch, October 3, 1870.
84 “After the Flood,” Richmond Whig, October 4, 1870.
85 He was called “Landrum Nelson” in the New York Herald and “Landon Henderson” in the Richmond Whig. Having not found individuals by either name, I believe that the individual in question was Landrum Henderson who was a Corporal in Company 37 in U.S.C. Troops and lived in the Richmond area after the war.
and ended the story with a dubious phonetic style quote attributed to Mr. Henderson. The quote read, “Well, dar, dat’s done gone; but de Lor’s will be done; ol’ Mas’r knows what’s the bestest.” The quote is reprinted here because it is the only attributed quote from an identifiable African American source pertaining to the flood. However, it is hard to believe that Mr. Henderson spoke these words, especially as a former Corporal in the Union Army. It is plausible that the Herald created this quote to coincide with their other racist commentary which included an account of supposed superstitious practices that African Americans engaged in during the flood. Although there is no way to verify their specific intent, it is clear that they were not in the business of soliciting aid or sympathy for the victims in this location.

Despite the obvious need, there were few calls for charity and relief in Richmond following the flood. In the immediate wake, the Academy of Music proposed to donate the “receipts of the house” for the benefit of flood victims on Friday, October 7th. However, nothing is mentioned regarding the outcome. It is unknown if the donation actually took place or how successful it may have been. There were also periodic references regarding donations to the Legislative Relief Committee by entities outside of the city, but nothing specifically relating to a local committee for the Richmond area. The Whig made a point to comment about the urgency and need for aid in a singular article which proclaimed, “unless the charitable give them immediate assistance there must be great suffering among them.” Even with this acknowledgement, no appeals pertaining to a local aid committee were printed in Richmond in either the Richmond Whig or the Richmond Dispatch.

87 “A benefit for the Sufferers of the Flood.” *Richmond Dispatch*, October 3, 1870.
88 “After the Flood,” *Richmond Whig*, October 4, 1870.
It appears that Richmond was disinclined to form a committee or formally organize local relief. The Whig reported on the committee proceedings of the Norfolk Relief Committee and the Legislative Relief Committee, which indicates that the paper was not ignoring any potential relief efforts. However, there were no printed appeals requesting the formation of a local committee or solicitations for donations that took place in the city. At first, it seems possible that the citizens of Richmond may have felt that the Legislative Relief Committee would do a better job of providing and distributing relief because two of their representatives were appointed to serve on the joint committee. However, the Legislative Relief Committee was not actually formed until 10 days after the flood when all other locations consulted had already begun making preparations for alleviating the needs of the local sufferers.

It is possible that Victorian social ideas pertaining to morality and poverty may have shaped and influenced the relief efforts in the City of Richmond. At this point in time, relief thought had evolved to include the idea of the “undeserving poor.”89 This concept generally excludes certain segments of the population from aid due to the belief that they are unworthy due to various moral, cultural, or biological attributes. However, what is considered “undeserving” has varied throughout history. At its most general definition, it excludes those who are believed to be able-bodied individuals. However, other segments of the population are often excluded depending on prevailing social, political, or economic influences.

Additionally, there was a moral component which guided beliefs pertaining to the “underserving poor.” During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century the idea of

80 Katz, Undeserving Poor, 2.
pauperism resulting from deficiencies of morality began to rise and influence charitable thought. According to historian Michael Katz, “The redefinition of poverty as a moral condition accompanied the transition to capitalism and democracy in early nineteenth century America.”\(^{91}\) In Richmond, it appears that the sufferers of the flood were denied at least some portion of relief or active fundraising due to the belief that those who lost their homes had the perceived moral affliction of being “thriftless.”\(^{92}\)

Certain phrases and terms pertaining to the domestic sufferers’ plight in the Rocketts area appear to support this hypothesis. On October 4\(^{th}\), in its only mention of aid for the Rocketts area, a writer for the *Richmond Whig* noted, “It will not do to say that some of them are thriftless, and therefore, not deserving and on that account, withhold aid from all.”\(^{93}\) Here, the *Whig* appealed to its readership to help the poor. However, it made the point to acknowledge that some community members believed that some of the sufferers were “thriftless” and that this was a legitimate concern as a basis for “withhold(ing) aid”. To make a statement of this nature indicates that a significant portion of the *Whig*’s readership must have regarded the residents of Rocketts as a part of the “undeserving poor.”

The official Richmond City ordinances also reveal a general attitude and methods of sanctioned aid for the poor. The Ordinances of the City of Richmond were rewritten in 1869 and contain a section specifically devoted to the “The Poor” of the city. The pages outline the specific requirements guiding the administration and admission to the almshouse. Within this, there are stipulations that the applicants must be “proper

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92 “After the Flood,” *Richmond Whig*, October 4, 1870.
93 “After the Flood,” *Richmond Whig*, October 4, 1870.
subjects” to receive aid.\textsuperscript{94} The ordinance does not specify the requirements of a “proper subject” beyond stipulating that they must be a resident of Richmond for at least one full year. In keeping with contemporary aid practices, Richmond was very concerned about only caring for established residents of the city. To avoid an influx of vagrants and the extra financial burden for caring for the poor who came from other locations, Richmond had strict rules and fines to reduce this aspect of relief expenditure. Although the ordinance does not paint a clear picture of how Richmond cared for its own citizens, examining the Capitol Disaster which took place in April 1870 may help to better understand the culture of relief in Richmond.

On April 27, 1870 the second floor of the Virginia Capitol Building collapsed killing 60 people and injuring approximately 120.\textsuperscript{95} The Richmond Chamber of Commerce immediately formed a committee two days later on April 29, 1870. According to their minute book, the committee met almost every day until June 29, 1870. They raised a total of $80,603.58 and dispersed the funds to those who were permanently injured, widowed, or dependents of the deceased.\textsuperscript{96} This effort shows how effective and swift fundraising in Richmond could be for a cause or segment of the population that was deemed worthy. While this was a condensed local disaster, the overall number of casualties and those rendered financially destitute is somewhat equitable to those sustained throughout the entire geographic impact the 1870 Flood.\textsuperscript{97} It is possible that

\textsuperscript{94} Common Council of the City of Richmond, \textit{The Charter and Ordinances of the City of Richmond}, (Richmond, VA: V.L. Fork, Printer, 1869), 244.
\textsuperscript{95} “The Richmond Calamity” \textit{Harper’s Weekly}, May 14, 1870, 306.
\textsuperscript{97} The reporting for the casualties and those impacted by the Capitol disaster is worded as such, “The number of persons actually visited, all more of less injured, is 199; the number of beneficiaries, families or dependent connections of the injured, is 652; the number of widows aided is 31; the number of male survivors who are permanently injured is 17.” While it is hard to completely match apples to apples, the
the disbursement of flood victims across the state conflicted with Richmond’s priority of mainly caring for its established residents since many of the victims were spread throughout Virginia and West Virginia. The priority of caring for its own sufferers would explain the lack of aid solicitations and donations to the Legislative Relief Committee. However, it does not explain the absence of a local committee.

It is also plausible that the recent large scale fundraising in the city for the Capital Disaster victims left the citizens in a position where they were overtaxed and unable to contribute to the sufferers in Rocketts. The lack of funds may have played a pivotal role in the dearth of donated relief. However, many pocketbooks found suitable leverage to fundraise for another cause. The Robert E. Lee statue that would eventually be placed on Monument Avenue received significant funding from Richmonders during late October 1870. If the citizens of Richmond were able to donate money for a statue, then it appears that the lack of local relief may have been due to personal opinions about the “undeserving poor”, a preference for letting the almshouse handle the matter once the sufferers are truly destitute or even that the quick clean-up caused the flood to be removed from the thoughts of the potential donors.

Finally, it is possible that Richmond handled the situation differently because the flood did not visibly impact the great majority of the city. An article published on October 7th, reveals this sentiment by observing, “We took a stroll by the river yesterday and were astonished to find that the streets along the dock and leading to the wharves

Capitol Disaster was responsible for the deaths of 60 people, while the Flood was responsible for about 95. The flood rendered about 350 families homeless, while the Capital Disaster caused financial hardship and potential destitution to 652 people. It is unknown how many individuals make up the 350 families, but the two events are somewhat comparable in scale.
show so little trace of the late flood."98 To expedite clean up, Richmond utilized the Chain Gang to quickly clean up the streets and remove debris.99 Once the visible damage had been removed from the areas of the city where the elite would traverse, it seems that the flood was forgotten by many of the citizens and they moved on with their lives.

Days after the flood, the *Richmond Whig* published an article which promoted self-sufficiency and fortitude in the face of destruction. They recommended as a remedy to the devastation avoiding surrender to despair. Those who were injured must “summon all their fortitude, rally all their energies, and go to work again.”100 By the wording, the column was written by a Richmonder. The sentiment may have been an early incarnation of the “Virginia Way” which lauded self-sufficiency and a rejection of charity. Although the writer offered a noble sentiment, it did nothing to alleviate the needs of the sufferers who in many areas of the state faced starvation, exposure to the elements, potential bankruptcy, and even death in the most dire of circumstances. There are no known records of how relief came to this city, but it is apparent that it did not take place within the hands of a local flood relief committee.

The overwhelming response to the 1870 Flood fostered a spirit of charity and the use of goodwill to alleviate the needs of those who suffered from the flood. Unfortunately, a series of failures within the organizational structure caused the total amount of donations to be significantly less than what was needed to help all of the people who were rendered destitute. The death of General Lee caused a discernable distraction from the charitable work and was publically acknowledged as a contributing failure to Virginia statewide effort. When coupled with inflated donation amounts, beliefs

98 “The Damage by the Flood,” *Richmond Whig*, October 7, 1870.
99 See Appendix page 117 for *Harper’s Weekly* illustration
100 “The Remedy,” *Richmond Whig*, October 4, 1870.
about the “undeserving poor”, and an already financially strained populace the entire effort falls short. It is impossible to point to a single cause as the point of overwhelming failure, but it becomes clear that the needs of thousands of people were not met. Mr. Wiltse, despite overwhelming loss, was lucky to have friends and neighbors that he could rely on to help him in the immediate aftermath of the storm and may have fared better than those in other regions of the State. When the flood waters receded, a new landscape with overwhelming obstacles became the reality for hundreds of people who sought aid and received insufficient funds.
Epilogue

On September 29, 2015, Harrisonburg, Virginia received a heavy rainstorm that caused mild flooding on the James Madison University campus. In the scheme of things it was relatively insignificant. However, the storm was a poignant reminder of the flooding that began 145 years ago to the day. That morning, I was serendipitously handed a copy of the local newspaper coverage from the 1985 Flood and found that the reporting included references to the devastation that occurred as a result of the 1870 Flood.

As with other instances of flood newspaper coverage, large sections were devoted to comparative analysis of previous flood events and how they impacted the various areas. This sort of memory is helpful for putting the current incident in context, while also enabling those living through the most recent disaster to think about those who have endured before them. In part, it is a way of acknowledging that life will go on and get back to normal. However, it also evokes memories and long-term community ties with reverence to “old timers” who were historically a source of local memory.

In parts of the Shenandoah Valley, the 1870 Flood is often the preeminent event to which subsequent floods are compared. Its devastation is a part of local legend, which is most often recalled in passing during the wake of a later flood event. Although it occurred 145 years ago, the ripples of its impact were felt long after the event faded into memory. Through the loss of lives, buildings, structures, personal property and even certain landscapes, communities were permanently altered. Although it is nearly impossible to study the impact on each of individual lives within the affected communities, there are noticeable patterns of physical changes to structures and building
practices that resulted in long term changes to communities in terms of transportation, accessibility, and the location of new buildings.

Some of the structural losses resulted in changes to building practices, such as higher bridges and dwellings built farther away from waterways, which benefitted the affected areas during subsequent floods. Conversely, some structural losses, such as the Chain Bridge in Georgetown and White House Bridge in Page County, were not immediately repaired, causing transportation to be routed through other means for several years. At White House Bridge traffic was accommodated by a pay ferry until the bridge was rebuilt during the 1910s, which may have impacted the economic landscape in the immediate area for decades.¹

Hundreds of families suffered economic hardships and were only granted a pittance of relief. It is almost impossible to measure the effects of the economic losses for individuals, but most assuredly some families went bankrupt and others relocated. On a personal or community level, the suffering endured by the families who lost loved ones, personal property, or experienced environmental damage to the immediate surrounding landscape most often manifests as local histories and stories. However, several places that were heavily affected by the flood also erected monuments or museum exhibits that either memorialize the dead or discuss the damage to the immediate area. The memorials and historic discussions are nuanced and filled with various sorts of meaning and memory for the different localities.

The communities that received the brunt of the damage often memorialized the 1870 Flood through markers which remembered lost members of the community, like the Kite Memorial in Page County, or recorded the height of the water, as in Richmond. The

1870 Flood is also marked in areas which received repeated historic flooding, such as Scottsville or Harper’s Ferry. Here, the markers serve as a way to remember the disastrous events that repeatedly shaped community life along the waterways.

In Page County, sixty-eight years after the flood, a memorial was dedicated to the Noah Kite family on September 1, 1938. According to contemporaneous reports, over 300 people attended the dedication which included a program of speakers and the formal unveiling of the memorial located near the original house site. The event was advertised in local newspapers several months in advance. The planning and care that went into making the memorial happen is especially poignant when one considers that fundraising for the marker took place during the midst of the Great Depression. Those who spearheaded the commemorative monument were relatives of the Noah Kite family who began planning for the memorial after a large family reunion that took place during the summer of 1937. The reasons for the memorial at this particular point in time are unclear. However, it is possible that a nationwide drop in unemployment during 1937 may have contributed to the ability to fundraise or travel to a larger family reunion at this point in time. Plausibly, a larger reunion, more readily available funds (compared to previous years), and the involvement of Noah and Isabella Kite’s grandchildren (who would have been in their 50s and 60s) likely all played a role in the timing.

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2 “Shaft to Kite Family Erected”, *Daily News Record*, September 3, 1938.
3 “The dedication and unveiling…”, *Daily News Record*, June 16, 1938.
5 The spring of 1937 saw a boost in production and wages and the unemployment rate dipped to 14.3% for the year. The jump to a 19% unemployment rate in 1938 may have impacted the ability for individuals to travel in 1938. According to the Page News and Courier there was a 6.7% drop in visitors to the Shenandoah National Park in July 1938 (versus July 1937). “Shenandoah National Park Continues to Show Small Drop in Patronage,” *Page News and Courier*, September 2, 1938. (Unemployment statistics from http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1528.html)
The nearly six foot tall granite memorial was engraved with the names of the Kite family members who passed away during the flood and is surrounded with a wrought iron fence. The periphery of the memorial is encircled with a masonry stonework fence and stairs that lead from the road. In recent years, the original stone has been replaced with a new marker of machine-cut granite. The recent replacement shows continued care and the lingering importance of this memorial to its caretakers.  

Figure #9 - Noah and Isabella Kite Family Memorial

Although the marker is privately maintained by family members, it also has meaning for the larger community. The stone and stories of the events surrounding the Kite Family’s demise are part of the local lore and public knowledge about flooding events in Page County. Every time there is a major flood in the area, the tale of Noah Kite and his family’s tragic death is revisited in local newspapers. Sometimes the tale will lie

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*See Figure 9*
dormant for years before regaining public relevance for a printed retelling. In 1985, the events were discussed in detail in the wake of a large flood that was considered to be one of the worst to hit the Page Valley. This article went into detail about the differences between the 1870 and 1877 floods and how they impacted the community. It also discussed the different flood depths and damage which helped to place the most recent flood event into the larger context of historic flooding in the area.

When Hurricane Fran struck in September 1996, the 1870 Flood and the events near Honeyville were once again a part of the local newspaper coverage and a reminder that Page County had seen worse. The 1996 articles referenced 1870 Flood as “the worst flood to hit Page County.” At that point in time, it was generally accepted that the flooding as a result of Hurricane Fran was the second worst flood in the history of the county, surpassing 1985 which had held that distinction for 11 years.

The comparison to other historic flooding events or local natural disasters may in part be a way of coping with a present disaster. A sense of comfort may lie in knowing that others have gone through similar trials. Additionally, knowledge and discussion of a historic disaster may be a part of the local “sense of place” and understanding of the historic environment. The historic stories may serve as a way to exhibit community longevity and tie in a historic sense of community that resonates with long-time residents. These flooding events are a part of the local history and often remain in the shadows waiting to be used as a comparison or point of reference for a future flood.

In the town of Scottsville in Louisa County, the history of the town’s flooding takes on a prominent part of the local open air museum. A brick and stone marker displays the various heights of the “Floods of Record” for the town beginning in 1771
and ending in 1987. The marker recorded the height of the 1870 Flood as 30.7’. Although the marker records 13 major floods, the 1870 Flood is recorded as the highest flood that occurred here in the nineteenth century. The 1870 Flood also appears to be regarded as a point of reference for modern flooding. The Scottsville Museum’s website claims that the town has “has experienced twenty-one floods of 20 feet or more above mean low water level” since the 1870 Flood.

Figure 10: Scottsville “Floods of Record” Marker

Photograph taken June 2014 by Paula F. G. Weddle

According to the marker, the 1870 Flood was the 3rd largest flood on record that affected Scottsville.

The recorded quantity of flooding has adversely impacted the town throughout its history making it difficult to isolate the impact of a singular flood event. However, their

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7 The floods that are recorded as being higher in this area are the 1771 Flood (estimated to be 40-45 feet), Hurricane Juan 1985 (31.8 feet) and Hurricane Agnes 1972 (34.02).
open air canal exhibit references the combined impact of 1870 and 1877 on the canal system. The exhibit explains, “Despite the committed support of powerful commercial and political interests, plans for the extension of the canal were abandoned. Extensive flood damage in the 1870s forced closings of the canal and underscored the high cost of repairing and maintaining the canal.”

The marker also mentions a levee that was completed in 1989 and reduced the need for future flood recording in the town. According to the Scottsville Museum, the town has not been flooded since the completion of the levee twenty-five years ago.

Similarly, in Richmond, Va. flooding in the Shockoe Bottom area was a common occurrence until the flood wall was built in 1994. Prior to its completion, there were many flooding events that shaped Richmond’s history, including two “hundred year floods”, both of which received markers. A monument commemorating the 1771 flood was erected on Turkey Island by the Randolph family in 1772. The marker is a brick obelisk that has an inscription which reads, “The foundation of the pillar was laid in the calamitous year, 1771, when all the great Rivers of this country were swept by inundations never before experiences which changed the face of Nature and left traces of their violence which will last for Ages.”

This particular marker is likely the oldest extant flood commemoration in Virginia. It is particularly important because its existence may signify a change in the way that people thought about floods and the need for historic remembrance. It also may have influenced Richmonders to commemorate the

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1870 flood event with a marker because of repeated comparisons to the 1771 Flood and knowledge of the earlier marker.

After the 1870 Flood, the citizens of Richmond decided to mark the height of the flood crest with a bronze plaque and granite pillar which stood in front of the St. Charles Hotel on Main Street until the hotel was demolished to make way for Main Street Station in 1901. The marker was last located in 1936 face down in the mud near the north end of Mayo’s Bridge. Its demise may be associated with the higher floods that followed in 1877 and 1889 and may be a symbolic representation of the 1870 Flood’s demise into the recesses of history. Although it was an important event that shaped the lives of those living in 1870, repeated flooding with higher flood levels likely reduced its importance in subsequent years. As a result, when Main Street Station was built in 1901, Richmonders may have felt that the marker was no longer relevant.

It is not uncommon for relevance and meaning to change over the course of time. Repeated flooding often makes it difficult to keep track of the various flood events. Additionally, natural disasters have not been a prominent topic of historic scholarship until recent years. Even with reduced prominence, knowledge of the 1870 Flood often rears its head during times of subsequent flooding, marking its importance to local memory in short and intermittent spurts.

Although general knowledge of the 1870 Flood has all but faded into history, the study of its aftermath, economic impact, and distribution of aid reveals a great deal about regional life in Virginia and West Virginia in the post-Civil War world. As a case study, it shows how the examination of media coverage and charitable aid in response to a natural disaster can be used to better understand different facets of regional political,

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12 “Stone Pillar, Turned Turtle, Undermines High Water Talk,” Richmond Dispatch, April 1, 1936.
economic, and social history. Even though the flood took place 145 years ago, it was an important event that shaped the lives of those who encountered the waters that caused “a scene of ruin and desolation” that was “scarcely paralleled.”  \(^{13}\)

\(^{13}\) The Late Destructive Flood,” *Virginia Free Press*, October 8, 1870, 2.


## Appendix

Known Casualties of the 1870 Flood*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age (If Known)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin Agee</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Columbia, Fluvanna Co.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzie Allen</td>
<td>teen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Mt. Jackson Shenandoah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Alshire</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Page County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elzora Blakemore</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Front Royal, Warren Co.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flora Blakemore</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Front Royal, Warren Co.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Mary Blakemore</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>White</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Mary Helen Blakemore</td>
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<td>Thomas A. Blakemore</td>
<td>68</td>
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<td>Nicholas Breeding</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Shaw's Fork, Highland</td>
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<td>John Burke</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Strasburg, Frederick Co.</td>
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<td>Charles Chamberlain</td>
<td>48</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>William H. Davis</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Slabtown, Rockingham</td>
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<tr>
<td>William Doorough</td>
<td>1 yr, 6 mo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Slabtown, Rockingham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doorough Family</td>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Slabtown, Rockingham</td>
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<tr>
<td>Doorough Family</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>Slabtown, Rockingham</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Slabtown, Rockingham</td>
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<td>Youth</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Columbia, Fluvanna Co.</td>
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<td>Jacob Harvey</td>
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<td>African American</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Front Royal, Warren Co</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Ann Hoskins</td>
<td>1 yr, 6 mo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Front Royal, Warren Co</td>
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<td>Young lady w/ Hoskins</td>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Front Royal, Warren Co</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Youth</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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**West Virginia**

<table>
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<tr>
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<td>“Brady Girl”</td>
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<td>Race</td>
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*Source: County Vital Records, Historic Newspapers*

*Documented casualties located at the time of this thesis. If other victims are located, they will be added to the list on 1870flood.com*
Images from Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper
October 22, 1870, pages 88-90
RICHMOND, VA.—INTERIOR OF A HOUSE AT ROCKETS—REMOVING FURNITURE UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

RICHMOND, VA.—SCENE OPPOSITE THE ST. CHARLES HOTEL—CITIZENS IN SCOWS PICKING UP MERCHANDISE.
RICHMOND, VA.—SCENE ON THE BANKS OF THE JAMES RIVER—NEGROES RECOVERING HOUSEHOLD UTENSILS FROM THE FLOOD.

RICHMOND, VA.—SCENE NEAR ROCKETTS—THE NEGRO THAT UPON NO CONSIDERATION WOULD MOVE HIS FURNITURE.
Engravings from Harper's Weekly
“The Flood in Virginia” October 22, 1870, page 676

The break in the Long Bridge across the Potomac at Washington.

The flood that recently swept near Virginia was the most destructive ever known in that town. At Lynchburg the James River rose about 500 feet of the overflow of the Long Bridge was entirely swept away, and boats upon which the send-there were broken.

The inundation of Richmond. — [From a photograph by E. H. Linn & Co., Richmond.] In twenty-two feet of water, most of the town and its property suffered; and with the approach of the water, the city was in a state of despair. At the harbor, the tide rose rapidly, while the flood was rapidly descending. Several streets of the city were entirely submerged, as shown in the illustrations above. At the ferry, the water rose from the first to five feet deep.

Harper's Ferry.
Peter Bixler’s relief allotment was one of sixteen distributions for the Springfield Township in Page County that was reported in the *Page Courier* on December 16, 1870. Mr. Bixler and his family were fortunate to have received a sizable relief allocation in terms of physical goods and are a good example of a larger relief portion. This photo is a modern compilation of the listed items based on my interpretation of the description. Although the items depicted are not 100% accurate, they help to illustrate an example of the limited resources that were parceled out to victims of the flood.

Peter Bixler’s relief included:
1 **Comfort**: I interpreted this to mean a comforter. In the photo, it is located in the center with a hat resting on it.
2 **Blankets**: The blankets are stacked to the left of the photo. Only the top crocheted blanket is visible.
3 **9 yds Ticking**: Ticking was a blue and white cloth used for bedding. I could not afford 9 yards, so its depiction is somewhat reduced. It is located 2nd from the top of the cloth goods on the right.
4 **7 ½ yds Sheeting Cotton**: Located on the top of the right stack of cloth goods.
5 **8 yds Sheeps Gray**: Sheeps gray was a heavy cloth of undyed grey wool. The depicted item is located on the bottom of the right stack of cloth goods.
6 **1 Tea-kettle**: The style of and size of the tea-kettle are not mentioned. I decided to represent this item with an iron kettle which is located in the middle of the photo.
7 **1 Coffee Mill**: The style of coffee mill is not listed. It is represented with an antique mill which may be a later model.
8 **1 Bed Mug**: “Bed mug” is another term for a chamber pot. I chose to represent this with an ironstone mug. However, the original would likely not have had a spouted lip.
9 **6 ½ Cotton Flannel**: I assumed this was 6 1/2 yards of cotton flannel. This cloth is located directly above the sheeps gray on the right.

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268 “Distribution by the Relief Committee,” *Page Courier*, December 16, 1870.
**1 Spool Boss:** I interpreted this to mean a sewing spool. It is depicted as a wooden spool in the foreground.

**1 Bunch Thread:** The allotment did not specify a color, so I chose white. I also could not find specification for how much thread was in a “bunch.” Although incorrect, the thread is depicted with embroidery floss to illustrate a somewhat substantial amount of thread.

**1 Dozen Buttons:** It is unknown what size, type, or style of buttons were received. However, it was likely shell, metal, or glass. I used twelve 3/8” four-holed shell buttons.

**3 Yards Brown Cotton:** The brown cotton is located directly below the ticking on the right.

**6 Plates:** It is unknown what type of plates were received and whether or not they matched. For the purpose of this photo, I used six matching 10” Blue Willow patterned plates. The Blue Willow pattern would have been available at this time.

**3 Cups:** I used 3 matching Blue Willow patterned cups in the photo. However, the style of cup is likely not accurate for 1870.

**3 Saucers:** I used 3 matching 5 ½” Blue Willow saucers.

**1 Dish:** It is unclear what type or size of dish was received. Unfortunately, I only had a divided vegetable dish on hand. The original item was likely not divided. This represented dish is located towards the middle of the photo in the foreground.

**1 Bowl:** The size and style of the original bowl is unknown. For the purpose of this image, I used a 9 ½” round Blue Willow bowl.

**1 Paper Sugar:** The term “paper sugar” generally refers to a cone shaped compressed brick of sugar that was often covered in blue paper. The size of the paper sugar is unknown. I had trouble locating scholarship pertaining to the style of paper sugars in 1870. As a result, I used an earlier stylistic model that was popular during the late 18th century. It is located towards the middle of the photo between the coffee and the iron kettle.

**1 do. Coffee:** I was unsure if “do.” referred to the number of ounces. I used whole coffee beans in the depiction.

**1 Hat:** It is unclear what style of hat was received and whether or not it was for a man, woman, or child. Although unclear, I used a straw hat made for a man. However, it is likely not completely period appropriate.

½ **Dozen Buttons:** Here again, it is unknown what size, type, or style of buttons were received. I used six ½” four-holed shell buttons which are located in the foreground of the photo near the spool boss and thread.
Transcriptions

Transcribed Poem – Mrs. C.J. M. Jordan’s Poem about the Flood at Lynchburg
From W. Asbury Christian’s Lynchburg and its People, p. 281

Out in all that storm and darkness, lashed by the tempest fury wild,
On a bridge that spanned the river, stood a mother and child.
There in mute, awe-stricken terror, as the tide about them swept,
All unmarked by any other save the Eye that never slept—
Stood they clinging to each other, helpless, homeless and alone,
Mute—until the mother’s sobbing woke the child’s assuring tone,
When in accents, low and plaintive, like a harp string softly stirred,
Spake the little voice, appealing, sweet as evening song of bird:
“Don’t cry, mother; ’twill be over by and by. I see a spark
Of light now coming towards us; God can see us in the dark.”
And the mother’s heart took courage, and she pressed the little hand
With a closer, firmer pressure, as she peered towards the land.
But, alas! the darkness veiled it from her eager, anxious sight:
And the rushing swell of waters quenched the near approach of light.
Lone and helpless—faint with terror, dumb with agony untold—
The feeble woman bowed her head; the child unloosed its hold.
“Good-bye, mother; I am going, for my limbs are cold and bare,
But I know if we are drowning God can find out where we are.”
And as out that child-voice floated, on the stormy night-wind borne,
Dashing waves and roaring torrents mingling with its angel tone,
Suddenly there swept a current, tossing high its foaming crown,
And the bridge that arched the river with its precious freight went down!
Down alas! the child and mother, all unmarked by human eye,
As the waters’ angry gurgle swallowed up their dying cry,
And from noble lips that struggled for their rescue, tempest-tossed,
Rose the cry aloud to Heaven, through the midnight shadows, “Lost!”
“Lost” indeed were they to danger; “lost” to terror and alarm,
While around their trustful spirits stretched the Everlasting Arm.”
Transcribed Article #1


**The Late Flood**

**Project of Aid for the Sufferers.**

The following letter from General Imboden is published and warmly endorsed by the New York Herald:

New York, October 4, 1870

To the Editor of the Herald:

Sir—In your editorial comments this morning on the terrible calamity that has just befallen so many of the long suffering, uncomplaining, struggling people of my State—Virginia—you make a suggestion to this great and wealthy city that I hope will be acted upon, and that some aid will be rendered to the thousands of poor people, white and black, in the regions swept by the late and unprecedented freshets. I am personally familiar with the whole region drained by the James river and its tributaries and the Shenandoah, and, from the accounts I have seen in the papers, as well as private information from home, I am satisfied that the suffering entailed upon the people, especially the poor, will be greater for a time than any they endured in the (to them) most disastrous period of the war. The very means of daily subsistence have been swept away from thousands of people in a few hours. Crops, mills, and animals are all destroyed along the water courses in many of our fairest and best counties. Starvation stares thousands in the face unless prompt assistance and supplies are furnished. Our own people again, as in the past, will heal each other as fast and as liberally as possible, and probably no appeal will be heard coming from the sufferers themselves. Years of great trail and endurance have taught them to bear calamity without complaint. But I know that even small sums of money, promptly expended in the purchase of provisions for the poor among the sufferers, will greatly mitigate the immediate effects of this fearful calamity. The object of this letter is to suggest how contributions made here can be immediately applied to the relief of these people. Let such organizations as the Mercantile Exchanges, Board of Trade, Gold and Stock Exchange, &c., designate some one or more of your leading banking houses as a depository of funds contributed. I have no doubt some of them would cheerfully consent to receive and transmit the funds. Let all such deposits be made to the credit of Gilbert C. Walker, Governor of Virginia, whose large and generous heart and high position would insure the prompt and proper application of the charity. The Legislature has just met at Richmond. Governor Walker can organize committees of members from the devastated counties, who would at once through their boards of supervisors in the counties be able to distribute the finds properly in the purchase and delivery of flour, meal and salt to the destitute in their midst. I have had no time to
correspond with Governor Walker on this subject, but I know the man and know how well and how energetically and faithfully he will perform this office of charity and philanthropy to a suffering people. If I can be of any service in bringing into communication parties who take hold of this matter here and Governor Walker or others in Virginia during my stay this well, I will cheerfully render it in behalf of the women and children of my suffering State, so suddenly cast down again from that hope and cheerfulness inspired by good crops and brighter prospects than they had enjoyed for ten years. I will be found daily at the office of the Virginia International Land, Loan and Trust company, 90 Broadway, over the National Bank of the Republic, from 10 till 2.

J. D. Imboden
Transcribed Article #2 - Mr. Wiltse’s Letter
“To the Charitable” From the Norfolk Virginian, October 26, 1870

The following letter from one of the sufferers by the late flood was received by the Rev. M.J. Langhorne, of this city, a day or two since. A notice of the writer appeared in the news columns of our paper on Saturday, and we are assured by Mr. Langhorne, who has known him long and intimately, that all the statements which have been made are strictly true. Although Mr. Wiltse does not ask aid, he is in very destitute circumstances, and those of our citizens who may wish to help him in a pecuniary manner, can leave their donations with Mr. Langhorne, by whom they will be forwarded to the sufferer. We publish his letter in full:

Dear Brother Langhorne;

I have been wanting to write you for sometime, but I was not certain of your whereabouts. Doubtless you have seen in the papers that my family were drowned in the recent flood. Oh! was it not heart rending for me to see my dear wife and little ones perish in my sight, and no mortal hand could save them. If I had not asked, and obtained divine help, I would now have been a lunatic. My oldest was at school, he is the only one I have left out of five; I lost two some time ago, one of them drowned, and two in the recent flood, boy and girl. They might have come out, I was not at my house, but she did not apprehend any danger until it was too late. The water rose so fast we did not have time to do anything hardly we wanted to do. My house was near the river and was the first one surrounded, but it was not the first that went away. I was living at Rio Mills, on the Rivanna, six miles north of Charlottesville. The papers report Mr. Jennings and his wife drowned, but that is a mistake; he lost two children – one of their bodies has not been found yet. I recovered mine two days after, and they were nicely buried, all in one coffin. The little children lay in their mother’s arms. Oh! she was an affectionate wife and mother, and it was so hard for me to give her up. I was left in a very destitute condition; never recovered anything at all; have never seen a piece of my house, that I know of; it was broken to atoms. The people are very kind to me, and have given me clothing, and a little money, but I have not been able to get to business yet.

Let your petitions go up in my behalf, and write to me soon.
Transcribed Article #3 – An Appeal for Relief from the Virginia Legislative Relief Committee

“The Late Flood – An Appeal for Relief” *From the Norfolk Virginian*, October 26, 1870

*To the people of Virginia,*

While the streams were still swollen with the waters of the flood which so recently devastated the larger portion of the State, the General Assembly received a message from the Governor informing them that several donations of money had been placed in his hands to be appropriated to the relief of the sufferers, and suggesting the propriety of taking some action to further the ends of charity to our fellow citizens.

The undersigned were then appointed a committee to consider what measures might be devised in the premises. They had scarcely assumed their duties when the hearts of the people, already sore and bleeding from their recent afflictions, were stricken with overwhelming anguish by the announcement of the death of General Lee. While the corpse of her best beloved son lay cold upon her bosom, the State could not bethink her for the time of her bereavements of her children, and all other tasks were laid aside, all other griefs forgotten, that we might commune and mourn together in our common sorrow, and do honor to our illustrious dead.

But now that we have laid our great citizen to his final rest, we cannot ignore our duty to the living; we must give ear to the pleading voices of distress which come to us from the regions which were ravaged by the devouring element. It needs no words to engrave forever upon the minds of those who witnessed it the terrible picture of wreck, and woe, and want that was presented in the track of the turbid waters. Throughout the wide and fertile section which lies between the Potomac and the James, and from the Alleghenies where the floods were gathered to the bay in which they precipitated their muddy currents laden with the spoils of wealth and industry, there was a scene of ruin which would have warmed the coldest heart to pity and wrestled aid from the hardest hand. All felt without suggestion the crying need for relief. We only asked ourselves what plan of general relief can we recommend for adoption. To the treasury of the State we could not turn. The want was so great and widespread, the State itself so poor, that the little she might have contributed would have crippled her still more than she is, and yielded but little benefit in the wide distribution. Without perplexing ourselves, then, to devise schemes which we could not execute, we resolved at once to turn to that resource to which the cry of feeble want has never, never been uttered in vain—we resolved to appeal to the people of Virginia themselves.

To you, then, people of Virginia, we bring our appeal to give what you can to relieve your unfortunate and needs brethren. Sharing, as you do, in the glory of that long succession of achievements which have made out State memorable and her sons honored among all nations of the Earth—sharing, too, in that series of misfortunes which have
tried us with sterner tests and united us with even closer ties, shall we not turn with one accord from the sepulcher of our dead chief to exercise toward each those tender sympathies and enlarged charities of which he was so bright and beautiful an exemplar.

Long and dire as is the catalog of our calamities, this has been attended with more physical suffering than any that ever befell our State. War and conflagration never swept with a single blow so wide an arc never involved as once so many people; and the memory of the oldest inhabitant recalls no precedent to this sudden deluge. The high-water marks of other days were buried deep under the water, and history itself is at fault in searching the past for its equal. We must go back at least a century to find the memorials of a flood which can be named in comparison.

To those who reside upon or near the water courses which traverse the State from the mountains to the sea it were useless to recall the harrowing spectacle which met their eyes when the streams overleapt their accustomed channels, and swelling in volume with every pulse of the tide, deluged at once the growing crops and swept away the garnered fruits and the costly structures of years of culture and toil. Mills, locks, bridges, fences, barns, manufacturing establishments, were dashed to pieces or hurled away in the fury of the currents; and dwellings, with their inmates, were oftentimes caught up and lost together.

What adds with tenfold effect to the disastrous consequences of the flood was the unusual rapidity with which the streams arose, and the narrow region of the country to which the rains which preceded it were confined. In the more eastern portions of the State, there was little, if any rain. In the mountainous regions the very gates of Heaven seemed opened, and the torrents quickly accumulating rushed in heavy waves down the valleys into the lowlands, giving no warning of their coming until it was too late to escape them. This it was a rare and exceptional case that a miller could remove his grain, a farmer his gathered crops, a manufacturer the implements or products of his manufactory, a storekeeping his merchandise or a family its household goods. Thus, in many cases, the family was cut off or surrounded before it was roused from its slumbers. Thus they were in many cases swept away with their fated homes, or had time only to fly naked or in dripping garments to find themselves houseless and homeless, stripped of all earthly possessions, and surrounded by friends unable to render them aid—whose want only embittered their own.

By the destruction of many of the largest industrial establishments that lined the streams, hundreds of laborers have been deprived of employment, and lost the only resource upon which they could rely for the support of their families. It cannot be hoped that a fund can be realized sufficient to fo more than relieve the actual and pressing wants of those placed in distressing circumstances, either by the immediate consequence of the flood or those incidents resulting. Five millions of dollars would not overreach the amount of losses in property, but a few thousand judiciously and promptly applied would
go far to supply food, clothing and essential comforts to the more indigent and needy of the sufferers.

The committee have thought proper to address their appeal only to the people of Virginia, but they deem equally proper to say that any donations from the people of their sister States will be most gratefully received.

It affords them pleasure to record here the liberal contributions which have been forwarded to the Governor from citizens of other States. No sooner had the intelligence of the disaster been communicated to the country than latters or telegrams were received by him from the following parties, authorizing him to draw upon them for the respective amounts named:


These evidences of generous and active sympathy from abroad are peculiarly gratifying, and should stimulate those of our own people who have still the means to assist their fellows to energetic exertions and liberal donations.

Missing line…Co-operation of the citizens of the Commonwealth to secure its prompt and complete success.

Fellow citizens: It is for no sect or section, it is for no party or class, it is for no alien or distance or doubtful cause of charity, that we address you, but for your own kinsmen and countrymen, sprung from a common ancestry, nourished with you upon a common soil, who have shared with you a common history, who are bound to your common destiny, and who are at your doors throughout the Commonwealth in need of the necessities of life, we implore your aid.

Truly he gives twice who gives quickly to those who stand upon the verge of winter without food, shelter or clothing to protect them from its pinching wants.

W. D. Smith,
Charles Campbell,
Robert L. Owen,
Senate Committee.
A. M. Keiley,
S. S. Turner,
J. D. Jones,
P. Bradley,
J. W. Daniel,
House Committee.
Oct 9, 1870
(Partial transcription)
“If you see the Richmond Whig you will see there a letter of mine from the NY Herald last week in regard to aid for our suffering people along the James & Shenandoah – In the engrossing cares of personal & public life(?) here, my heart is in our dear old state, and the great distress of so many I feel calls upon me to do what I can to assist them. Ahead my letter has been the means of sending in some thousands of dollars to Gov. Walker to buy provisions. Dreadful as the Calamity has been it is a great relief to know that it has not reached your part of the state.

My own immediate family are considerable losers. My brothers are damaged not less than $2000 and my old father near 80 has had all his corn crop destroyed besides other losses – and many of my nearest friends have been nearly ruined. This wide spread and (?) distress has for over a week occupied so much of my thoughts that I have felt it was almost wicked to think only of my own individual happiness and had been doing ever since I parted from you – And I have therefore spent several evenings in writing letters to others instead of to you, to give them such comfort as I can.”
Minutes of the New York Stock Exchange Governing Committee
October 12, 1870 – Image and Transcription

October 12, 1870

A regular meeting of the Governing Committee was held this day in the Government Department room, at 2 ½ o’clock; 26 members present.

The President in the Chair.

The minutes of the last meeting, were read, approved.

A communication was received from the Stock Exchange with the request “that the sum of ___ Dollars, be appropriated, for the relief of the sufferers, by the recent flood in Virginia, half of said sum to be sent to the Governor of Virginia; and half to the Relief Committee Harper’s Ferry; West Virginia.”

W Hartshorne, briefly stated his reasons for opposing the applications; and concluded by offering the following:

Whereas,

On the 26th January last, this Committee, “resolved that it was inexpedient to entertain any application for donations from any source, other than that of relief got members of the New York Stock Exchange.” And

Whereas,

The condition of the finances of this Institution; and its contemplated expenditure do not warrant the Committee in departing from the rule then adopted – therefore

Resolved

That the Committee respectfully decline making the appropriation asked for. Seconded and adopted.
Richmond Merchant Losses as reported from the *Richmond Dispatch*,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business/Merchant Name</th>
<th>Amount of Loss in Dollars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.A. Hutcheson</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Harvey &amp; Co.</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.E. Phillips &amp; Co.</td>
<td>1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses Meyer</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farrar and Sherry</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Jenkins</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schaffer, Baker</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berrian &amp; McPhall, druggists</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O.A. Strecker, druggist</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Bodeker, druggist</td>
<td>1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Powers, grocer</td>
<td>500 or 1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William S. Wood, tinner</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.M. Smith and Co., agricultural implements</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Zimmer, Confectioner</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geo. Guvernator, restaurant</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. G. Babcock, ice dealer</td>
<td>5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Kierstung, restaurant</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.D. Sullivan, grocer</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W.A. Walsh &amp; Co., grocers</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W.H. Turpin, seedsman</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chas. T. Palmer, agricultural implements</td>
<td>2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.H. Duke, grocer</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julius Kraker, clothing</td>
<td>1800</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Samuels, boots and shoes</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Wallerstein, millinery</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Golden, shoes &amp;c.</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myer Kraker, dry goods</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. Weber, willow ware, etc.</td>
<td>1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Harris &amp; Bro.</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses Myer, clothing</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose &amp; Day, tin and stoves</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L.T. Chandler</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Oppenheimer</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jno. Allulai</td>
<td>250</td>
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<tr>
<td>J. E. L. Masurier</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Baccagaluppi</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concani &amp; Banachi</td>
<td>2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W.J. Harwood, shoes</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Melti Larocca & Co., grocers 800
H.K. O'Dwyer, restaurant 300
M.J. Rosendorf, dry goods 500
S.B. Lillenfield, dry goods and variety 3000
J. Jacob, dry goods &c. 350
Joseph Strause 100
A.K. & H. C. Adams, grocers 100
Gresham & Sons, grocers 500
L. Lichtenstein 100
M. Golden, liquors 1000
James L. Porter, hardware 3500
J.M. Higgins 150
S. Maccubbin, feed store 200
Cardwell & Co., agricultural implements 1000
Ettenger & Edmond, machinists 1500
Talbot & Sons, machinists 4000
Mrs. Caroline Schwartz 200
G.S. Stacy & Son, mattress factory 200
C.F. Taylor, grocer 75
J.T. Vaughn, grocer 500
Herman Morris 400
M.J. Geradorf, machinist 400
S. Mason, grocer 50
B.C. Galloway 25
Smith & Potter, junk dealers 1200
Currie & Co. 500
M. Lotterzo 200
W.H. Scott, druggist 1200
B.G. Blythe 100
Adams & Co. 150
J.A. Lacy 200
J. Augustine 150
P. Levy & Sons 50
James River Steamboat Co Sheds 2000
J.R. Johnson & Co., Richmond steam forge & rolling mill 1000
R.J. Smyth, ice dealer 1600

Approximate Subtotal 54,100
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