

The Fourteenth State

The Flood Worse than Irene

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The infamous flood of November 3-7, 1927, was the worst weather-caused economic disaster in Vermont's history. Its damage was more extensive than Hurricane Irene of August 2011.

Statistics alone for this catastrophe are impressive. Vermont Congressman Ernest Gibson told the U.S. House Committee on Flood Control that the damage equaled half the total assessed real property value of the entire state. There were more than 85 fatalities including the state's lieutenant governor, who stepped out of his car in Barre and was swept away and drowned; 1,285 bridges were washed away or damaged; railroad tracks were ripped apart and freight cars and locomotives overturned; hundreds of houses, barns, schools, and other buildings were damaged or totally destroyed; miles of the state's roads were battered. Vermont suffered an estimated \$30 million in damage, an amount equivalent to more than \$400 million today.

By today's standards, Vermont in 1927 was unimaginably primitive, a condition dramatized by three stark facts: In the entire state there were only 20 miles of hard-surfaced roads. Railroads were the popular way travel: 55 trains a day passed through Burlington's Union Station. Only 30 percent of farms had electricity.

In the bigger picture, the flood of '27 moved Vermont from independence to interdependence. That is the basic story told with perceptive analysis in the pre-Irene book "The Troubled Roar of the Waters': Vermont in Flood and Recovery, 1927-1931." It was published in 2007 by the University Press of New England as part of a series called "Revisiting New England: The New Regionalism." Co-authors were the husband-wife team of Nicholas R. Clifford, who taught history at Middlebury College, and the late Deborah Pickman Clifford, author of several biographies of what she called "remarkable Vermont women."

"The Troubled Roar of the Waters" is not a picture book of flood damage, though it offers enough photographic samples to illustrate clearly how serious things were. The first chapter describes numerous accounts of the rising waters during those initial terrible forty-eight hours. The rest of the book is devoted to the physical and political aspects of reconstruction and repayment, including a thoughtful chapter, "Her Greatest Product is Character," which could stand alone as socio-economic essay.

Congress in 1927 had to deal with another massive flood in addition to Vermont's. For several months earlier that year the Mississippi had massively overflowed its banks and caused unprecedented chaotic destruction south from Cairo, Illinois, and all the way through Missouri, Arkansas and Mississippi to New Orleans. Thus Vermont's two House

members had to compete with politically powerful Southern states as they appealed for federal help. (Vermont's status as an at-large House district began in 1932.) An appropriation of \$2,654,000 finally "squeezed through after many hairbreadth escapes," wrote Vermont Congressman Elbert Brigham when it had finally passed.

The experiences tested a reluctant nation's political sense of sympathy for victims of a powerful natural disaster. Vermont's own President Calvin Coolidge's attitude was especially cool, and he refused to visit the damage caused by either major 1927 flood. "The government is not an insurer of its citizens against the hazards of the elements," Coolidge coldly declared in his state-of-the-union speech that December.

The Vermont flood of '27 and its aftermath changed the state profoundly. The tradition since 1865 of a single-term for governor was broken when Governor John E. Weeks was re-elected in 1928; and the old "Mountain Rule" also fell. Governor Weeks's proud motto "Vermont can take care of its own" was pushed aside as federal aid was sought and accepted. Post-flood, the Vermont Commission on Country Life and similar citizen groups renewed their efforts to redefine the ways the state could and should modernize.