

HEAR UR
SEASON 6: Rapid History: Tales of the Genesee River
EPISODE 5: Wrath of Water, Wrath of God

By Shannon Hayes, Yutong Lu, Anthony Alvarez Silva

SFX: FLOWING RIVER WATER SOUND, LIGHT

ACCOUNT NARRATOR A

March 16, 1865: Freshet in Upper
Genesee Valley reported.

**SFX: FLOWING RIVER WATER SOUND, 6DB INCREASE, LAYERED WITH
DEEPER RIVER SOUND**

March 17: Water was very high at
Rochester, aside from the *usual* alarm,
the situation isn't especially serious

SFX: OVERFLOWING WATER, NARRATOR ALMOST SHOUTING OVER WATER

Night of March 17: The river kept
rising... Water is pouring straight from
the river into the canals... An estimated
\$1,000,000 in damage. The entire
central portion of Rochester is under-
(gurgle water)

**SFX: SUBMERGING UNDERWATER SOUND, AS WELL AS UNDERWATER DEEP
VOID SOUND**

THEME

SHANNON

That was a first-hand account from a
member of the Rochester flood committee
in 1865. In the early hours of St.
Patrick's Day, 1865, telegraphs arrived
in Rochester, warning of high water
levels rushing from the Upper Genesee
towards the city.

[dramatic pause]

They were ignored.

MUSIC: SYNTH BED (soft synth pad leading to next line)

SHANNON

I'm Shannon Hayes, and you're listening to HEAR UR, Season 6: Rapid History: Tales of the Genesee River. This is Episode 5: Wrath of Water, Wrath of God.

We will explore the historic floods that shattered Rochester and examine how disaster can bring a community together –

or not.

MUSIC AUDIO switch???

Rochester was no stranger to the flooding of the Genesee River. Four devastating floods of note wreaked havoc in the first half of the 19th century alone.

In 1813, flooding swept away a local sawmill.

In 1835, water in the Genesee Flats reached a height of 6'8".

In 1857, flooding carried away the Main Street Bridge along with several buildings.

In 1850, Lyman B. Langworthy predicted that within the next 100 years "unusually heavy Spring freshets" would cause "floodwaters of the Genesee River [to] flow through the First Ward." His prophecy would come true 15 years later.

RUTH ROSENBERG NAPARSECK

It certainly did. The Genesee River... People didn't really appreciate the magnitude of the watershed up until 1865 when we had the most serious flood in Rochester's history.

BARBER CONABLE

Of course, the river rises all the way down in Pennsylvania.

RUTH ROSENBERG NAPARSECK

That's right.

BARBER CONABLE

It does have a tremendous watershed.

SHANNON

That was a clip from Speaking of Rochester, a series by WXXI Public Broadcasting. The 1999 interview features Ruth Rosenberg Naparsteck, the city historian of the time.

RUTH ROSENBERG NAPARSECK

In the last century, people thought of the Genesee River as just appearing here. They used it for filling the Erie Canal, for feeding the mills and also for dumping things into and then they thought that pollution would just dilute itself and be carried off through the...the Genesee River.

SHANNON

According to *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New York*, the amount of snow that fell in New York and Pennsylvania the winter before the flood was unusually high. The sheer volume of that right on the Genesee watershed...that's what the book hypothesizes made 1865 different.

E. Croswell, author of _____, remarked that these circumstances "could not fail to produce an extraordinary and disastrous flood."

Water audio??

SHANNON

During the flood of 1865, nearly the entire central portion of Rochester was submerged, and damages exceeded \$1,000,000

-- that's over \$19,000,000 in today's value.

The maximum rate of flow at Rochester was estimated at 54,000 cubic feet per second, roughly two-thirds of the flow rate of Niagara Falls.

The story of the Flood of 1865 is about the destruction and devastation caused by this natural disaster. But on a much deeper level, it's about so much more.
(pause)

SHANNON

When one thinks of flooding, one may think of hurricanes or heavy thunderstorms; however, for Rochester, huge snowmelts caused mayhem.

RUTH ROSENBERG NAPARSTECK

The people here ignored it. They looked around and didn't see any particular weather conditions that they were not used to and they thought. They were somewhat of a flood every year anyway, the River was fit-full in the Spring.

About 6 hours later the River began to rise very seriously and by midnight of the evening they received that telegram the water was coming over the Broad Street Bridge which was then the Erie Canal aqueduct; it leveled with the top of it, so that you could not see in the old photographs where the Erie Canal left off and the Genesee River left off.

SHANNON

In floods like 1865, most of the damage came from tributaries and structures around the river that overflowed with

water, such as the Erie Canal or the Main Street Bridge.

RUTH ROSENBERG NAPARSTECK

It came so rapidly that the people were unable to rescue their goods from The Downtown area...many of the buildings became submerged right up over the top of the 1st floor...it carried whole trees that it had swept off the Outer Banks...Some went broadside against the bridges and backed up creating their own dams.

SHANNON

At the start of this episode, we heard from a flood committee member describing the flood as it approached the city. He went on to detail all the destruction that he saw:

SFX: Earth-moving sound in tandem with water stream sound

ACCOUNT NARRATOR A

At the time, the embankment of the Genesee was higher on one side, resulting in a temporary lake, adding to the already swollen stream.

SFX: Earth-moving sound in tandem with water stream sound

SHANNON

An embankment is a structure made of earth or rocks meant to prevent flooding of surrounding lands. Ironically, the Genesee and its embankment made the Genesee incredibly destructive, especially as it is harder for its citizens to deal with an entire lake than it is to deal with temporary flooding.

SHANNON

In collected writings and accounts about the 1865 flood, we find stories from Rochestarians who were deeply affected. Here are the words of Simon McKenzie, a native of Rochester.

SIMON MCKENZIE

"I have resided half a mile above the village of Canawangus for the last sixteen years; watched the progress of the flood in the Genesee River in March last; when the flood was at its greatest height, the water broke through the canal on both sides at several points"

SHANNON

In another account of the flood, "Small boats could be seen in all the streets... people were seeking safety, some removing goods, others carrying food to their families."

BARBER CONABLE

As a result of that terrible flood, did they They decide to take corrective action?

RUTH ROSENBERG NAPARSTECK

They did, but in a typical government way, I think, they had the 1st of about 3 major studies over the next 50 years.

SFX: BARBER laughs

SHANNON

While the flood investigations began, Rochester contacted the state and federal governments for support.

"A Committee, consisting of [previous] Mayor James Brackett, Aldermen Fisb, Cram, Hebing, and Copeland, were appointed to go to Albany to procure the passage of a bill appropriating \$1,000,000 from the State Treasury to pay the damages of the Flood."

SHANNON

The city government wasn't the only one asking for compensation. Citizens sought damages from the State of New York, claiming it was responsible for the flood. Here is a reenactment of one of many Rochester citizens waiting on compensation.

SFX: Under construction noises (no power tools)

LANDOWNER

The flood of 1865 isn't my fault, but I don't see why it can't be the

SFX: Fade out under construction noise

government's fault. My mill business is currently being repaired, but I would much like the state to pay for the profits and damages I've lost.

SHANNON

Repairing the city was a monumental task, made even more challenging by the fact that families across Rochester were missing their husbands and sons who had been drafted in the Civil War. With parts of the population missing, restoring the city to its former glory was a slow and arduous process.

SHANNON

A second "Committee, consisting of [current] Mayor Daniel D.T. Moore, Honorable Roswell Hart, and General John Williams, [was] appointed to go to Washington to procure a suspension of the draft."

SHANNON

Meanwhile, the flood committee developed solutions to the Genesee runoff problem...

TOM WENZEL

1865 is one of the worst floods that Rochester has had. And there was a need to have some kind of a flood control

structure for the flooding that happened.

SHANNON

This is Tom Wenzel, from the Army Corps of Engineers at Mt. Morris Dam.

TOM WENZEL

But there was also some other dams that were proposed around William Pryor Letchworth's time...so there was kind of different needs for dams and kind of, I don't want to say fighting going on. But there was, you know, people tugging different ways to get dams for different things along the Genesee River.

SFX: Cheering and then loud crowd chatter

SHANNON

The Legislature authorized the city council to bring any necessary lawsuits to prevent new intrusions on the river bed. They immediately took charge against a new building plan along the river, and their case went to the Supreme Court...

SFX: 3 gavel hits, crowd chatter fades out

JUDGE MULLEN

The necessity of such a law is demonstrated in this case...It is the duty of the courts to prevent any such encroachment or obstruction.

SHANNON

Judge Mullen knew what the city had faced and knew that the people wouldn't let things continue how they were.

JUDGE MULLEN

I cannot believe that the people of Rochester will for any considerable

amount of time longer permit the bed of a stream, so essential to the welfare and other structures erected by private persons for their own emolument, especially after it is demonstrated that persistence in such a policy must result in irreparable injury to the interests of the city and its citizens.

SHANNON

And despite all this, that's precisely what happened. More and more piers and waterfront businesses were built. As much as people talked about standing up against encroachment, it wasn't put into action.

SFX: Fade In Telegram sound

SHANNON

The message came back regarding the

SFX: Telegram Fade Out

draft. It was a resounding no. Rochester citizens would not be allowed to return home to help rebuild until the war was over.

SHANNON

The State did not respond until 1869, when it denied responsibility and dismissed every petition, repeating the same justification over and over: the flood was "a special visitation from the Almighty, against which human foresight could not provide."

SHANNON

The causes of the flood weren't addressed, so the water didn't stop

SFX: SYNTH DRONE SWELLING UNTIL ACCOUNT NARRATOR B

flowing. Over the next few decades, we hear repeating cries for change from Rochestarians:

ACCOUNT NARRATOR B

"It is impossible to tell how many were lost. Fifteen of those who went down are known to have been saved..."

ACCOUNT NARRATOR C

"Ice gorge at Clarissa Street Bridge, Rochester, setting water back in Erie Canal and flooding certain districts...Most serious flood ever known in Rochester."

ACCOUNT NARRATOR D

"No less than 3.5 billion cubic feet of water passed Mt. Morris."

ACCOUNT NARRATOR E

"Maximum rate of flow at Rochester 21,000 cubic feet per second. Flats between Mt. Morris and Rochester flooded."

ACCOUNT NARRATOR F

"All homes in that vicinity have been abandoned. Thousands of feet of lumber, some of it valuable mahogany from the yards of desk manufacturers, have gone down the river, which is still rising at the rate of two inches an hour."

ACCOUNT NARRATOR B

"Search is being made for the bodies at the scene of the calamity last night, but none have yet been recovered..."

"A moment before, as they saw the damage the flood was doing, he heard them say..."

ACCOUNT NARRATORS A-F

"'Glad we don't live in Rochester.'"

SFX: Reverbed on the last quote, delayed on Rochester

SHANNON

The flood of 1865 was catastrophic. It stands as a lesson. It not only teaches us of how the city recovers from the wrath of the river, but shows us how change is prevented. It's a clear example of how a community can come together, demand change, demand support, and it still might not be enough. The political structures we design to help us can very quickly become obstacles to change and improvement. The Flood of 1865 stands as a warning.

SFX: Fade Out Music, Fade In light stream with bird sounds

SHANNON

But...we can learn.

In 1952, Rochester completed the Mount Morris Dam, which resides in Letchworth Park.

(beat)

Flooding has always been a testament to Rochester's prosperity, destruction, and rebuilding. This natural disaster has always chaperoned the city's growth and resilience. It is our history, but it didn't have to be our future.

SFX: Fade out all nature sounds

SFX: Hurricane Storm Brewing Until Start of Next Episode

SHANNON

HearUR is a podcast created by students at The University of Rochester.

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links for this episode and others at
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Thanks for listening.