

Indiana Underwater: The Flood of 1913



This year marks the 100th anniversary of the 1913 flood that struck the Midwest. In a period of just two days (March 24th and March 25th) Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York experienced tornadoes and the equivalent of two to three months worth of rain. A late spring thaw left the ground saturated, or still mostly frozen. As a result, massive flooding began to occur and impacted fifteen states along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. In Indiana, communities along the Wabash, White, and Ohio Rivers were most affected by the flooding, which also extended to hundreds of smaller tributaries throughout the state. The following National Weather Service Report was made by Acting Section Director C. E. Norquest:

The flood of March, 1913, is without parallel in the history of Indiana. Water states reached were from 2 to 8 feet higher than those recorded in any previous flood; the loss of life and property was unprecedented; thousands were driven from their homes, fleeing for their lives; transportation lines were helpless through loss of track and bridges; telephone and telegraph lines were crippled; communities were cut off from communication with the outside world for from 24 to 48 hours; cities were deprived of light and power by the flooding of power plants; isolated towns were threatened with famine; and for a period of 3 days or more the great commercial enterprises of the State were at a standstill.

When you consider the reaches of the White and Wabash rivers and their tributaries, it is no wonder there was such extensive flooding in Indiana. The White River drainage area for both the East and West Forks of the river comprises more than one third of the total area of the state. The West Fork of the White River starts south of Winchester and flows west towards Muncie and Anderson and then angles down towards Indianapolis. It continues southwesterly to Martinsville, Spencer, and Worthington before meeting with the East Fork just north of Petersburg. The total length of the West Fork is 273 miles. The East Fork of the White River starts in Columbus and travels through Seymour, Bedford, and Shoals before reaching Petersburg. It is 192 miles long. In 1913 the average rainfall from the seven National Weather Service reporting stations along the West Fork of the White River was 7.81 inches. Along the eight stations of the East Fork it was 8.41 inches. Rainfall records for the West and East forks during the previous flood in 1904 were 4.97 inches and 4.19 inches, respectively.

The other major river that experienced unprecedented flooding in Indiana was the Wabash River. The Wabash starts in Fort Recovery, Ohio, and then meanders through the state of Indiana for 445 miles. It drains approximately sixty of the state's ninety-two counties, which cover over 33,000 square miles. Cities in the river's path include Bluffton, Huntington, Wabash, Peru, Logansport, Lafayette, Attica, Terre Haute, Vincennes, and New Harmony. Though the Wabash typically averages 231 feet wide, the 1913 flood left it almost seven miles wide.

The widespread nature of Indiana's river system resulted in flood damage to built landscapes across the entire state. Destruction to railroads had a severe impact on towns and cities, as the flooding effectively brought passenger and freight service to a standstill, and several locations became nearly isolated from all ground transportation. The Baltimore and Ohio Southwestern Railroad sustained a great deal of damage to tracks, stations, and storage facilities. The railroad trestle at Blue Hole, a body of water near Washington, Indiana, collapsed into the flood waters. Because of the importance of the railroads in carrying goods and passengers between towns, some bridges and trestles, such as the one at Blue Hole, were repaired immediately following the flood. Trains were up and running over Blue Hole by April sixth.



PILE DRIVER AT WORK REBUILDING THE TRESTLE OVER BLUE HOLE

Entire neighborhoods and even farmlands were also swept away by the flood waters. In the Daviess-Knox County area, the west fork of the White River surged to cover fields of crops. Local Washington newspapers reported that many farm homes and outbuildings were damaged. In the northern part of the state, Fort Wayne was hit hard by flooding along the St. Joseph, St. Mary, and Maumee Rivers. The Fort Wayne baseball park, a notable landmark at the time, was

nearly submerged. In total, 5,000 Fort Wayne homes and businesses sustained 4.8 million dollars in damage. By the time the Wabash River reached the crest of its flooding, it had lifted homes off of their foundations and destroyed numerous buildings surrounding the Miami County Courthouse in Peru, Indiana, southwest of Fort Wayne. The county courthouse, which sat at a higher elevation than most other buildings in the town, was one of the few structures that survived the flood.



The built landscape of Indianapolis was also altered by the flooding. The west side of the city received the brunt of the damage. The Morris Street levee broke on March 25th and it was reported that ten to fifteen feet of water swallowed up whole neighborhoods. Strangely, a report about the flood revealed that even when the levee was breaking “no one anticipated any great trouble.” Presumably those sentiments changed at some point before the White River crested at

25.7 feet. The Indianapolis & Vincennes railroad bridge over the White River collapsed that same day and the Washington Street Bridge gave way the next. Factories such as Kingan Meat Packing Company, positioned along the banks of the White River, sank into the waters, altering the city's industrial landscape. Varying reports state that between four and six square miles of the city were under water. Nearly 4,000 families lived in the working class neighborhoods that were flooded.

In Logansport, the Wabash River and its tributary Eel River flooded after three days of steady rain. Damage was extensive. The entire downtown was flooded with up to nine feet of water and the currents were so strong that even boats had a difficult time making their way to rescues. Four bridges were destroyed and another was condemned. Over 5,000 people were left homeless and thousands more were stranded on upper floors and roofs of houses. On March 27th the rain stopped and water levels began to fall. By the next day the river was back to normal levels.



Even before the March 1913 storms hit, there were indications that they were going to be severe. Newspapers reported on the vast damage from tornados, floods, and fires that occurred from Nebraska through Illinois. The amount of rain that fell in Indiana as a result of the storms is remarkable. According to records from the National Weather Service Weather Forecast Office in Indianapolis from 1913, the heaviest rains fell on March 24th. The following table shows flood stage, previous highest levels, and daily 1913 water levels in feet for Indiana cities along the White, Wabash, and Ohio Rivers.

City/River	Flood Stage	Previous High-Height & Date	Mar 22nd	23rd	24th	25th	26th	27th	28th	29th
Anderson/ White	9	18.8 on March 1903	4.3	3.8	11.8	17.6	20.6	14.0	10.2	7.8
Indianapolis/ White	12	19.5 on April 1904	4.7	?	11.0	18.0	?	?	?	?
Elliston/ White	21	29.6 on March 1904	?	?	11.8	23.8	27.8	31.3	30.4	28.6
Shoals/ White	20	34.1 on March 1904	7.4	8.0	8.8	21.6	29.5	37.0	42.2	41.7
Bluffton/ Wabash	12	16.7 on April 1904	3.2	2.5	12.3	17.5	20.0	19.0	13.8	12.3
Logansport/ Wabash	12	17.3 on February 1883	3.6	3.8	12.1	?	22.5	?	?	?
Attica/ Wabash	12	29.7 on August 1875	6.2	6.8	15.9	24.6	31.6	33.4	31.6	28.5
Terre Haute/Wabash	16	27.7 on February 1883	7.1	7.0	14.5	19.5	27.0	31.2	30.8	29.2
Evansville/ Ohio	35	48 on February 1884	28.4	28.3	27.5	26.0	30.1	36.6	40.4	43.0
Madison/ Ohio	46	61.8 on February 1884	25.1	23.6	21.6	27.5	43.5	53.6	57.0	59.6

The range of flooding varied from city to city. The cities of Indianapolis and Logansport do not have complete data because the bridges where monitoring was taking place were washed away.

By the time the storms passed and the waters receded, the damage from the floods nationwide totaled over \$200 million and totaled \$25 million in Indiana. About 200,000 people in the state were displaced from their homes and 180 bridges were destroyed. Communities like Lyles Station in Gibson County would never be the same in population, the built environment, or the importance to the surrounding area. In the decades following the flood of 1913, government projects were undertaken to prevent future flooding. During Roosevelt’s presidency, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) dredged and widened bends in the White River near Muncie. WPA employees also built levees and flood walls. In 1940s the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

built floodwater pumping stations to regulate water levels in case of another flood. These structures (levees, flood walls, and the pumping stations) are permanent reminders of the devastation caused by the flood of 1913 and are proof that the natural disaster not only altered Indiana's built landscapes by sweeping away farms and neighborhoods and damaging bridges; it also resulted in intentional changes to the landscape to prevent future destruction.

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