

Colliding hurricanes loosed Great Flood

Before Hurricane Fran, there was the big one.
And it wasn't Hugo.



**LOUISE
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Nearby History

True, no one who lived in the Piedmont in 1989 can forget the devastation wrought by Hurricane Hugo — the torrential rains, the wind, the power outages, the property damage.

But the Great Flood of 1916 was like nothing before or since.

It happened because of a most unusual and unfortunate coincidence: two hurricanes colliding head-on.

Those who lived through it will always remember. Listen to Leroy Blue, a Catawba Indian who watched the flood from the riverbanks: "I hope I never see anything like it again."

The first storm — this was before hurricanes were given names — came ashore at Mobile, Ala., on July 5.

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With no warning, deluge washed out every bridge and mill

FLOOD

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When the weather system got to the Appalachians, it stalled for eight days, pouring rain the entire time — and swelling rivers all over the Piedmont, including the Catawba.

The second hurricane hit around Georgetown on July 14. It came inland and collided with the Mobile hurricane.

There was no radio service, no signals of any sort, to warn people of the impending danger.

By July 15 it was too late to take precautions anyway. The floodwaters hit York County with a fury.

Right away, the water took off 10 feet of the India Hook dam that had been constructed in 1904. The gauge washed away at 40.4 feet, and the water kept rising.

By July 16 the bridges were beginning to wash out. By July 18 every highway bridge and all nine railway trestles on the Catawba River had been swept away.

The storm killed as many as 50

in the Carolinas, and some sources put the total at 80. Many of the victims had gone out to the river to see the rising waters and drowned.

Witnesses near Rock Hill reported seeing "great masses of trees and logs along with parts of buildings, bales of cotton, watermelons, small animals and snakes" sweeping by.

In those days there were still cotton mills beside the river. Every water-driven mill from the N.C. mountains to Camden was swept away, along with the bales of cotton and finished cloth on hand.

The Ivy Mill, a large flour mill, located on River Road back of the present site of Indian Land High School in Lancaster County, toppled into the river. So did the 4-year-old Roddey Bridge that crossed the river near the Ivy Mill.

Some daring souls, fearing that it would be a long time before they could again cross the river, gambled and drove over Roddey Bridge's one lane just before it collapsed.

Thousands and thousands of

acres of young cotton and corn were destroyed. Terraces were washed out. Deep gullies crossed the fields.

Recovery was agonizingly slow. It took six months to rebuild the India Hook dam and replace the power house. Every cotton mill in Rock Hill and Fort Mill was shut down — and there was as yet no unemployment insurance or Social Security for mill workers caught up in a disaster not of their making.

There was nothing in place by either the state or federal government to give direct flood relief to any of the victims. However, the U.S. Department of Agriculture did send engineers to help rebuild dams and bridges.

For 12 days, Charlotte might as well have been a thousand miles from Rock Hill. Not only were the railway trestles gone, but telephone wires were wiped out. The victims of the 1916 storm would have been astounded at how quickly communication was re-established after Hurricane Hugo.

The heroes of the Great Flood

of 1916 were crews gathered up by the Southern Railway from the Midwest and middle Atlantic states. About 2,275 men made up six work camps on 12-hour day and night shifts. Flares lit the night as the men rebuilt the bridges and relaid railway track.

Southern Railway replaced 686 miles of track, using 525 carloads of lumber and 427 carloads of piles. They also used three carloads of dynamite and blasting powder.

Lancaster and Chester County cooperated in establishing a ferry to replace the Seaboard Railway's trestle on the Chester-to-Waxhaw, N.C., route.

In the meantime, the Catawba Indians brought out their small boats called bateaus and carried passengers and the mail across the river twice a day. The leaders of the Catawbas were John Brown and Jim Sanders, a graduate of Carlisle College.

It was a brave act of the ferry-men, as well as the passengers, to set off across the swollen river with its numerous snags and

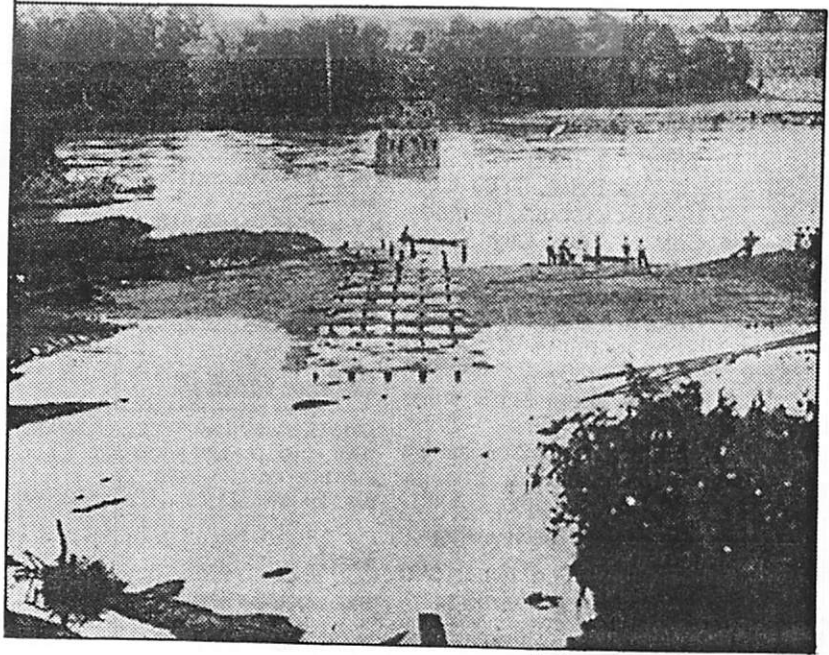


Photo courtesy of Southern Railway

Water covers the site where the Southern Railway trestle crosses the Catawba River between Rock Hill and Fort Mill.

heavy debris.

The property damage of the Great Flood of 1916 was estimated at \$21 million — a stupendous sum when one considers that bread was a nickel a loaf and eggs were a penny each.

Leroy Blue never forgot.

“We were on high ground,” he said. “But you began to wonder if the rain and flood would ever end.”

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