



# Foundation Document Overview

## Johnstown Flood National Memorial

Pennsylvania



### Contact Information

For more information about the *Johnstown Flood National Memorial Foundation Document*, contact: <http://www.nps.gov/jofl> or (814) 893-6322 or write to:

Superintendent, Western Pennsylvania Parks, Flight 93 National Memorial, P.O. Box 911, Shanksville, PA 15560

## Purpose



## Significance

Significance statements express why Johnstown Flood National Memorial resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- At least 2,209 men, women, and children were killed along the 15-mile path of the Johnstown flood by drowning, burning, and crushing.
- A complex web of factors led to the failure of the South Fork Dam and can be traced to the social and environmental dimensions of the Industrial Revolution.
- The recovery efforts following the flood established The American Red Cross as the premier entity for disaster relief. The actions of The American Red Cross—in combination with the homegrown actions and contributions from private citizens and the Pittsburgh Citizen’s Relief Committee—became the model for disaster recovery.
- As a result of attempts to assign responsibility for the Johnstown flood, major changes in U.S. laws were made to allow industry to be held liable for damage and loss of life.

*JOHNSTOWN FLOOD NATIONAL MEMORIAL commemorates the tragic Johnstown flood of May 31, 1889.*



## Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **South Fork Dam ruins.** The abutments and sluiceways that are the remaining ruins of the South Fork Dam, the control tower foundation ruins, and the historic carriage road that traversed the abutment and continued upslope.
- **The dry bed of Lake Conemaugh.** The land below the 1,600-foot contour of the lake, including the South Fork Little Conemaugh River, wetlands, and vegetated slopes.
- **South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club Historic District.** The South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club clubhouse, annex, and cottages.
- **Unger Farm.** The Unger House, the visitor center, the springhouse ruins, and the fields and the orchard on the hillside above the South Fork Dam.
- **Morgue book.** Doctor David J. Beale's master list of the deceased, describing the condition of the remains and everything that was found associated with the person.
- **Sense of loss.** Visitors should have the opportunity to feel and understand the magnitude of the loss of life and the scope of the disaster.
- **Clarke photo collection.** Photographs of club members, activities, and the clubhouse and cottages that portray life on the lake before the flood.
- **Johnstown Flood National Memorial museum collection.** Historical objects and archival collections focused on the Johnstown Flood of 1889, including the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, and systematic archeological collections from within park boundaries and associated records.



## Other Important Resources & Values

Johnstown Flood National Memorial may contain other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Black Friday film.** An evocative dramatization that allows visitors to understand what it was like to experience the flood and the resulting devastation
- **Telegraph key.** The historic device from South Fork Station that was used to send the telegraph to warn Johnstown of the impending failure of the South Fork Dam.
- **Clubhouse artifacts.** The George Hetzel painting, the wine cabinet, and glasses from the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club.

## Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from, and should reflect, park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- A complex interplay of environmental, social, and economic factors set the stage for the failure of the South Fork Dam and the Johnstown flood of 1889.
- The failure of the South Fork Dam caused catastrophic destruction and death and revealed unforgettable acts of sacrifice, heroism, and negligence.
- The local, national, and international response to the Johnstown flood of 1889 resulted in unprecedented news coverage and broad-based relief efforts, and its popular legacy lives on as a transforming moment in American life.



# Description

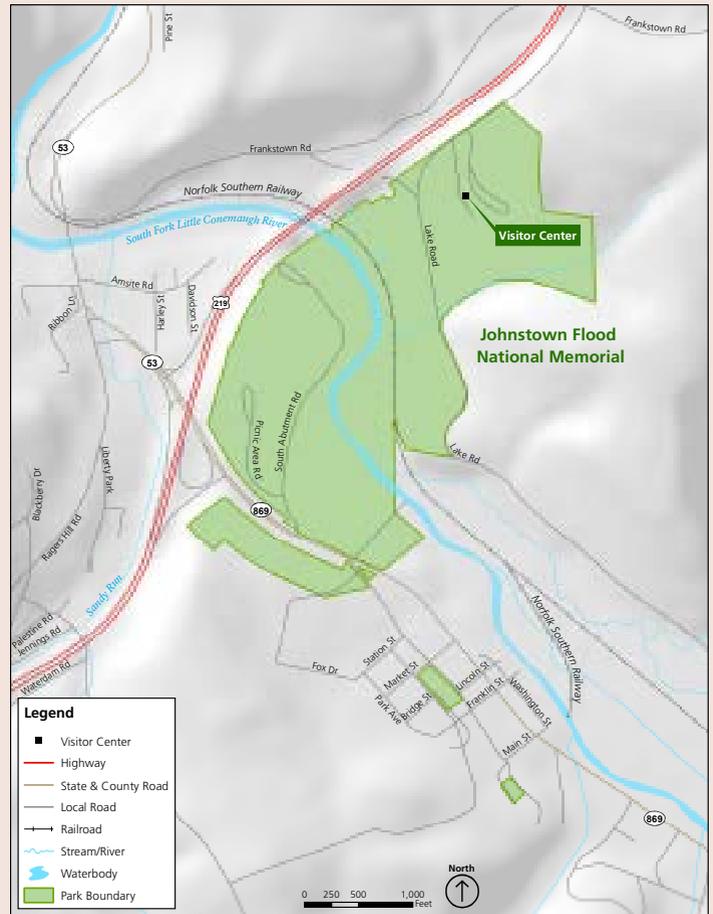
Johnstown Flood National Memorial is in Cambria County in southwestern Pennsylvania, about 10 miles northeast of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. The 178-acre park preserves the remains of the South Fork Dam and portions of the former Lake Conemaugh bed, as well as historic structures associated with the Johnstown flood. The resources are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Interpretation of the park focuses on the precursors and aftermath of the failure of the South Fork Dam, which caused the flood on May 31, 1889.

The South Fork Dam was originally constructed in the South Fork of the Little Conemaugh River between 1839 and 1853 as a water source for the Pennsylvania Mainline Canal, which became obsolete a year after completion of the dam. The dam fell into disrepair before it was eventually bought by the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. The dam was restored in 1881 and turned into a lake stocked with black bass to serve the club's resort.

Members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club were the wealthy industrialists, bankers, and lawyers who had profited from the Industrial Revolution, including Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, and Andrew Mellon. Residents of Johnstown, on the other hand, were mainly blue collar workers in the iron and steel factories along the Little Conemaugh and Conemaugh rivers. Johnstown had been strategically settled to exploit these resources and their location, despite the fact that the town was prone to flooding because of the general climate of the area and the town's location in the valley. The town's founders took a gamble in deciding that the proximity of natural resources outweighed the threat of serious flooding.

On the morning of May 31, 1889, Colonel Elias Unger, president of the corporation that maintained the dam and resort, noticed that the level of Lake Conemaugh had risen considerably during the night. Over the next five hours, Unger coordinated the attempts to prevent flooding through the digging of spillways and heightening the top of the dam, and the simultaneous efforts to warn the residents of Johnstown of the possibility of the flood. The last telegraph famously warned "The dam is becoming dangerous and may possibly go!"—yet, none of the warnings were heeded.

The South Fork Dam failed at 3:15 p.m. The sheer volume of water and size of the flood wave was magnified as it coursed its way down a steep, narrow valley, culminating in swift devastation of villages and towns in its path. By the time the flood hit Johnstown, the water was teeming with debris from houses, trees, railcars, and even a local barbed wire factory. When darkness fell, the debris piled up at the stone bridge on the Conemaugh River and caught fire, burning alive as many as 80 people trapped inside the rubble. Once the floodwaters had receded, the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Reverend Dr. David J. Beale, catalogued the remains of the townspeople and documented the death toll at 2,209 people.



The disaster occurred as the nation was recovering from the social and economic losses of the Civil War, and news of the catastrophic event dominated the country for a considerable time. Newspaper coverage, photographs, songs, literature, and art sprang from a national fixation with the destructive event. The classic conflict of man versus nature was debated, and to some degree, the tragedy was deepened by the idea that it could possibly have been prevented.

National news coverage, relief efforts initiated by Clara Barton and her fledgling Red Cross, and the sheer will of survivors resulted in the successful efforts to rebuild Johnstown. A lasting impact on the nation was the assistance the Red Cross provided in the relief effort, the first national disaster unrelated to war.

Today, the visitor center for Johnstown Flood National Memorial is a replica of the Unger barn, sitting on the hillside overlooking the remnants of the South Fork Dam. The South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club's clubhouse and some of its cottages are also managed by the National Park Service.