



**NOW
&
AND THEN**



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The Shenango River surged above the State Street bridge and into downtown businesses, schools and houses in the city's north and south flats. This is the first block on the south side of East State Street at the height of the flood on March 25, 1913, and, below, the scene today.

The legendary flood of '13 inundates the valley

By John Zavinski

A MID-MARCH MELTING of the winter snow pack nowadays heralds the return of spring and its greenery. But in the days before the Pymatuning and Shenango flood-control dams, it brought fear and uncertainty over how high the untamed Shenango River would rise.

On March 26, 1913, that answer was 18.6 feet deep, about 15 feet higher than normal. It easily bested subsequent floods from the

1930s to 1950s, which were mostly in the 13- to 14-foot depth and maxed out at 16 feet in October 1954.

One person died in the flood of '13, and it caused \$2 million in damage and flooded 750 homes in Sharon's downtown flats area, according to "The Official Souvenir History of the Shenango Valley Flood" published shortly after the disaster. Towns from West Middlesex to Greenville also suffered, as did many others in western Pennsylvania.



Floodwaters swirl southward down Chestnut Street in Sharon during the March 25-28, 1913, flood. The Willsonia Building in the distant left center until recently housed the Chestnut Street Cafe, and PNC Bank now stands on the corner at right.



John Zavinski/Life & Times



John Zavinski/Life & Times

In downtown Sharon, the Shenango River swelled to about six blocks wide at State Street, stretching with at least ankle-deep water between Irvine Avenue and Railroad Street.

The northern leg of Sharon's 8-year-old V bridges at Porter Way and Silver Street slipped from its pier into the river. The rush of water swirling near the present site of Penn State Shenango swept the three-story Sharon Herald building into the river as it returned to the river channel at the foot of Pitt Street.

Besides a few days without newspapers in town, critical rail, streetcar and telephone service were disrupted.

The flood made a solid argument for subsequent flood-control dams upstream, giving us reason today to anticipate, not fear, the spring thaw. ♦



John Zavinski/Life & Times

A bronze plaque just above the sidewalk indicates the high water mark in front of the First National Bank building at 1 W. State St. in Sharon.