



RESURRECTING A FLOODED CULTURE

Introduction

For many Americans the week before the 4th of July is a time spent preparing and planning for the national holiday celebration. What foods will be prepared and who will be invited to the parties held by families and friends? Unfortunately, for many Americans this year living in the Northeastern United States this was not the case. On June 27, as evening approached midnight, unusually heavy rains triggered a massive flood that ripped through many local waterways including the Mohawk and Susquehanna River.

Areas affected by the weather include sections of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland and West Virginia, and local and federal officials declared many sites disaster areas. The end result of this unusual weather was a massive loss of property, lives, businesses, memories and the local culture. The flooding that occurred here is frequently compared to New Orleans and the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. The disaster is also similar to the flooding of Florence, Italy, in 1966.

Local Landscape

The Southern Tier of New York includes eight counties. The Northern Tier of Pennsylvania includes five counties. Together they form what is commonly referred to as the Twin Tiers. The area includes rolling hills, valleys, rivers and streams. The counties in the Twin Tiers most affected by the June flooding were Broome, Delaware, Tioga, Otsego and Chenango in New York; and Bradford and Susquehanna in Pennsylvania. The Susquehanna River runs through these counties and ended the month of June with record-breaking water levels.

Causes of the Flood

Historically, the weather in June for the Twin Tiers is usually humid and hot with an average of 3.6 inches of rain monthly according to the Department of Metrology at the University of Utah (2006). Between the 25 and 28 of June “the Binghamton area received 7.14 inches of rain” (Kekis, 2006). This was caused by “a stalled low-pressure weather system that pulled moisture from the Atlantic Ocean” (NYS Dept. of Labor, 2006). The saturated landscape reached full capacity and water had no place to go but up.



Effects of the Flood

The effects of the June floods could be observed in nearly all aspects of the local culture. Everyone who lives in this area was either directly or indirectly affected. Some people lived high enough that they did not see any flooding first hand. Some who lived near the Susquehanna River were lucky and lost few possessions. Others lost their entire homes. In many towns like the town of Conklin, located south of Binghamton, New York, residents were forced to evacuate in the middle of the night. In some cases people were “rescued from the roof of their submerged home” (Kates, 2006).

The flooding that took place happened very fast and unfortunately many people were not prepared. This was also the case in New Orleans in August 2005 as well as in Florence, Italy, in 1966. In Broome County alone, “800 homes were destroyed and 300 severely damaged” (NYS Dept. of Labor, 2006). Many other effected areas in the Northeast suffered the same fate as Broome County. On June 28 Governor Pataki estimated property damages for the surrounding New York region “to total in the \$100 million range” (Kates, 2006). According to the City of Binghamton web site (2006) the estimate for damages in Broome County as of November 22 will exceed \$4 million.

Precautions Taken to Secure the Culture

The flooding that occurred in the Twin Tiers was considered a flash flood. These floods are extremely difficult to predict. Because the flood was a flash flood there were very few precautions. The only precautions that took place were evacuations of homes in the flood zone before the waters surged the property. In Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, nearly “200,000 people in the county of about 351,000 were told to get out by nightfall” (Gifford, 2006). The flooding that took the Twin Tiers by surprise acted just like the flooding in Florence, Italy, on November 1966, sweeping the city in the late evening and early morning.

Because people lacked knowledge of this flash flood many valuables were claimed by the Susquehanna River. Many people who lived through the experience can easily describe homes floating down the river. Flood insurance has always been expensive and many resident did not have the luxury.

How does this Disaster Compare to New Orleans and Florence, Italy?



The various cities and towns affected by the June floods had their own unique cultures. Large portions of the areas affected are considered rural. New Orleans and Florence, Italy, are very large cities with very diverse cultures, too. These world famous cities have their own unique identity. The three areas of the world share a common crisis situation that has been caused by the awesome forces of nature. The current state of New Orleans is still in dismay. The natural disaster in New Orleans was of a much larger magnitude than the smaller Twin Tiers region. But, the feelings of anguish these people share are the same.

Extreme loss and absolute uncertainty can only begin to describe the feelings that these people experience. Florence, Italy, and New Orleans are the same way with their people, museums and cultural displays. Florence and New Orleans are large cities and both hold priceless artifacts of their culture. But, who's to say that a small town can't hold something priceless the same way these great cities do? All cultures can identify something that describes who they are and what they believe in. Some residents of Owego, New York, a town located on the Susquehanna River, might feel very strongly about the newly built Owego Bridge that crosses the Susquehanna.

The real priceless artifacts that each tragedy can carry into the future is a working model of what worked and what did not work in efforts to prepare and recover from a natural disaster.

Steps towards the Future

For a city or town of any size the outcome of natural disasters can be felt by everyone. Businesses that do survive suffer from a slow economy. People need to spend more time cleaning up rather than earning an income. For some, their time is spent searching for a new home. Moving forward is going to be difficult for everyone.

Thankfully, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) offers disaster aid for those who qualify. On July 19 FEMA made "\$1.7 million in low-interest loans" (FEMAa, 2006) available to businesses and homeowners. The next day FEMA approved \$12.2 million for housing aid and \$2.3 million for personal property (FEMAb, 2006). FEMA was also directly involved in aiding New Orleans to recovery. The state government has made large strides to help the community. Governor Pataki on the following "Friday announced a \$35 million state emergency relief package" (Kekis, 2006). "The state has established a toll-free hot line" (NYS Dept of Labor, 2006) so that any one who needs assistance can be reached. Local efforts continue to aid to their neighbors. According to Kevin Harlin (2006) "Citizens Bank Foundation has contributed \$10,000 towards flood relief."



Clean up efforts still continue today. Fields and properties of Conklin still wear the brownish grey stains of the flood. Driving through Conklin today on Route 7 we will find houses condemned with large orange neon letters spray painted on the discolored paneling. For some people this was once their hometown. Now only a handful of residents are still in the area, aiding the clean up efforts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the floods took many things from the people living on these sites. The most precious was their way of life, their culture and their dignity. Those who lost their home and everything in it may have lost their pride, too. Throughout history natural disasters have taken many things from society. The only positive outlook a person can have when facing a situation like this is the opportunity for a new beginning. These people affected by the floods are forced to begin again.

From these natural disasters few things can be salvaged. One of these things is knowledge: knowledge of what to do in a state of emergency, knowledge of what causes an area to flood, and knowledge of how to clean up the ruins and start again. To resurrect a culture that has been torn by nature is no small task. But, with lessons and knowledge of the past, a human culture can almost always move forward.



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