

ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY FEBRUARY 26



On February 26, 1972, a Buffalo Mining Company impoundment dam collapsed, killing 125 people and leaving thousands homeless.

CSO: SS.8.17, ELA.8.1, ELA.8.5, VA/6-8.5, VA.6-8.9

Investigate the Document: (Governor's Ad Hoc Commission of Inquiry the Buffalo Creek Flood and Disaster Official Report, Gov 1. Buf 1. 1973; James Hagood Collection, Ph97-52)

1. Read the entirety of the report and list (3) things that you found interesting or relevant about the Buffalo Creek Disaster.
2. According to the map, in what county is Buffalo Creek located?
3. How many people were left homeless as a result of the flood?
4. Through Governor Moore's Executive Order, with what four significant duties did he task the West Virginia Ad Hoc Commission of Inquiry into the Buffalo Creek Flood?

Think Critically: Photo Analysis

- What stands out to you about this photograph of the debris left by the Buffalo Creek Flood?
- What is the *value* of this image? Does it help you gain a better understanding of the flood?

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 SUMMARY OF THE DISASTER

A mine-waste impoundment located on the Middle Fork of the Buffalo Creek watershed in Logan County (see Figure 1-1) failed a minute or so before 8 a.m. February 26, 1972, causing the sudden release of 17.6 million cubic feet of water (132 million gallons) onto the Buffalo Creek Valley floor.

The instantaneous release of the water behind this impoundment immediately began a fall of 253 feet to Buffalo Creek, washing out two additional combination waste banks and impoundments in its path, and tore off the corner of a burning mine-refuse bank before cascading directly into the western slope of Buffalo Creek Valley, one-half mile away.

As the blackened water, filled with sludge and refuse from mining operations, turned southwesterly on its subsequent path of death, destruction and devastation, it promptly wiped out the small community of Saunders, located within several hundred yards of the burning bank.

Sixteen more Buffalo Creek Valley communities--Pardee, Lorado, Craneco, Lundale, Stowe, Crites, Latrobe, Robinette, Amherstdale, Becco, Fanco, Riley, Braeholm, Accoville, Crown, and Kistler--were either partially or totally destroyed before the flood wave finally

traversed the winding, 17-mile course from the site of the impoundment and the confluence of Buffalo Creek with the Guyandotte River at Man (see Figure 1-2).

The 10-foot to 20-foot high flood wave traveled the valley at an average speed of better than 7 feet per second (5 miles per hour), reaching Man at 11 a.m. During those three hours at least 118 lives were lost with an additional seven persons still listed as missing by the West Virginia State Police. Besides the tragic loss of so many lives, an additional 1000 persons suffered injury.

Five hundred and seven houses were lost or demolished; 44 mobile homes were destroyed; another 273 houses were severely damaged; while nearly 663 more houses suffered damage to varying degrees. A total of 4000 people were thus left homeless by this flood.

In addition, 30 business establishments, 1000 automobiles and trucks, 10 bridges, and power, water and telephone lines were all destroyed, and the county road and the rail lines servicing the valley's coal mines were severely damaged. The photographs in Figure 1-3 are typical of the tremendous damage done by the flood.

Property damage was estimated in excess of \$50,000,000, while highway damage exceeded \$15,000,000.

McCoy, Donald, Jr., Male, 1-1/2 years--Amherstdale, W. Va.
 Waugh, Kathy, Female, 8 months--Lundale, W. Va.

Unidentified

Two white males, ages 18 months to three years
 One white female, age approximately three years

* * * *

The Buffalo Creek Valley communities and the number of persons who lost their lives in those communities are listed below in order of their location downstream from Middle Fork:

Saunders, 18; Pardee, 4; Lorado, 21; Lundale, 52; Stowe, 2;
 Crites, 3; Latrobe, 7; Robinette, 3; Amherstdale, 4; Kistler, 1.

1.3 CHARGE TO THE COMMISSION

In the aftermath of the Buffalo Creek disaster, Governor Arch A. Moore, Jr. (Figure 1-4), by virtue of Executive Order No. 4-72, created an investigatory body known as The West Virginia Ad Hoc Commission of Inquiry into the Buffalo Creek Flood (hereinafter referred to as Commission). Pursuant to said Order, the following members were appointed to the Commission: Jay Hilary Kelley, Dean, School of Mines, West Virginia University; John Ashcraft, Director, Department of Mines; Dr. Robert B. Erwin, West Virginia State Geologist; Ira S. Latimer, Jr., Director,

Department of Natural Resources; Elizabeth V. Hallanan, Chairman, Public Service Commission; Dr. Dan Kealy, representative of the U. S. Bureau of Mines; William E. Davies, representative of the U. S. Geological Survey; Charles D. Hylton, Jr., Editor, *Logan Banner*, citizens' representative; Julian Murrin, citizens' representative. By subsequent letter, Governor Moore appointed Dean Jay Hilary Kelley Chairman of the Commission.

Governor Moore, through the Executive Order, delegated to the Commission the following duties: (a) To investigate the causes, origins, conditions and reasons which led to the disaster which occurred on February 26, 1972, in the area of Buffalo Creek, Logan County, West Virginia; (b) To assess, locate and identify other areas of the state where similar conditions and potentials for disaster may exist; (c) To make proper evaluation and legislative recommendations to provide authority to supervise and control such impoundments to prevent such a disaster from recurring; and (d) To submit a report of its findings, conclusions and recommendations for immediate as well as long-term action. The Commission was granted a six-month period (ending September 1, 1972) to complete the aforementioned duties. (The Order appears in Addendum A.)

During organizational meetings, the Commission decided to conduct extensive and exhaustive fact-finding hearings in order to comply with the mandates set forth in the Executive Order. Accordingly, eight formal public hearings (Figure 1-5) were held

at which time the testimony of 91 witnesses was heard and recorded in 9 volumes and 2019 pages. The Commission's policy was to entertain testimony of the following: Any party requesting to be heard; all persons directly or indirectly involved; any person deemed to have information or opinions that might assist the Commission in drawing valid conclusions and appropriate recommendations; and persons providing professional assistance in the interpretation of technical information. To this end, two hearings were held at Man High School to facilitate the testimony of local witnesses directly involved in the disaster. Additionally, six other public hearings were held in Charleston, at which time testimony was heard from many representatives including, but not limited to, the following: the Pittston Company, U. S. Department of Interior, U. S. Weather Service, various other U. S. Government agencies, West Virginia State agencies, and expert witnesses in the field of civil and mining engineering with particular expertise in dam construction and design, coal-refuse disposal and processing, water clarification, and professional registration of engineers. A detailed list of witnesses and a summary of testimony are given in Addenda B and C, respectively. It is important to note that, although the Commission did not have subpoena power, governmental agencies at both the State and Federal level, Pittston officials and the citizens of Buffalo Creek, were cooperative with the Commission in voluntarily testifying before the Commission at its request.

The Commission, in its official capacity, met 26 times to deliberate and evaluate the testimony and other facts submitted. Prior to the hearings, the Commission made at least two visits to the site of the former impoundment and to the communities affected by the disaster.

In an effort to avoid expensive duplication in the identification and assessment of the same or similar conditions existing in the State, the Commission initially decided to await the pending pertinent reports by the Department of Natural Resources before instituting an independent survey. This position was further buttressed by cooperation and coordination with the Department of Natural Resources in compliance with the specific directive of the Executive Order. Subsequently, the Commission determined that said reports would constitute the base data upon which the Commission would, by an independently conducted, random spot check of the refuse banks, set forth qualifying parameters and conclusions.

The full conclusions and recommendations of the Commission are provided in Sections 6.0 and 7.0 of this report and are a result of months of exhaustive investigation and considerable deliberation of various related ancillary materials submitted to the Commission.

[Note: In this report, standard dam construction terminology is used when referring to right or left abutments. That is, when directions are used, unless otherwise specified, they are used "work wise" or facing downstream.]

