

Carroll Yesteryears

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50 Years Ago, Hurricane Agnes Became the Second 100-year Storm

By Mary Ann Ashcraft

Fifty years ago this month Carroll County suffered its worst flooding in over 100 years. The words “Hurricane Agnes” likely conjure up vivid images of what occurred over much of our area in June 1972.

Even if your property didn’t suffer, newspaper photographs of the village of Detour under nearly 25 feet of water probably linger in your mind. Crossing over Double Pipe Creek today you realize how susceptible that town was when more than 13 inches of rain fell in 48 hours across a wide swath from southern New York state to northern Virginia—the drainage system of the Susquehanna and Potomac rivers. Meteorologists described it as a 100-year flood. Yes, it was just that because on July 24, 1868, a similar flood devastated our region. Carroll’s newspapers of that era didn’t mention what happened in Detour, but carried stories of how the town of Sykesville suffered.

Before 1868 Sykesville straddled the South Branch of the Patapsco River with industry concentrated on both the north and south banks. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad tracks ran on the north side where there were also homes, a hotel, a general store, and the Elba Iron Furnace. On the south side was a significant cotton mill complex founded by James Sykes that included company housing.

A week after the flood, Westminster’s *Democratic Advocate* reported, “The destruction caused by the late flood at Sykesville is fearful. All the houses there have been entirely destroyed, and all that some persons owned has been swept away, and they are now houseless, homeless, and in absolute want for the necessities of life.” The paper offered to forward any contributions to “the sufferers.” Someone organized a concert in Westminster with proceeds from the 25-cent admission going to the needy.

Mr. Grimes’ large hotel near the railroad “with its entire contents, valued at \$10,000, was carried away, leaving the proprietor and his family with nothing in the world....” Sykes had built that 47-room hotel in 1830 but sold it. Zimmerman and Schultze’s store with contents worth \$20,000 disappeared without a trace. The *Advocate* said it had purchased a large supply of newsprint from J. Shauck upstream in Woodbine just before the flood “entirely demolished” his paper mill. Although these property losses may seem insignificant by today’s standards, in 1868 they were enormous. The newspaper did not estimate the value of local crops or livestock lost, but it described the loss of life as “very severe” throughout the region.

Reporters tried to capture the drama of the 1868 flood. “Some idea of the immense force of the water may be formed from its rapidly washing away the walls of the Granite Mills [site unknown], part of which were twenty feet thick.”

Damage to the B&O, the Western Maryland, and the Northern Central railroads was tremendous. Bridges and tracks stretching across all of central Maryland and into Baltimore City were washed

out. It is interesting to note that Hurricane Agnes had a similar effect in 1972. The nearly bankrupt rail lines of the northeastern U.S. in the 1970s faced huge repairs as well as shipment delays caused by the flooding which affected parts of New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Agnes became a contributing factor to the formation of the federally financed Conrail railroad system.

Two summer storms, essentially a hundred years apart, wreaked nearly identical havoc across the mid-Atlantic region. The hope is that 100 years remains the magic number.

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Photo credit: Carroll County Times

Photo caption: Not much was left of Sykesville to photograph after a flood tore through it in July 1868. Hurricane Agnes left large parts of Detour under many feet of water as seen in this June 1972 photo.