

## *The Flood of 1903*

*(from The Spartanburg Journal, June 6, 1903)*

# 3 PACOLETS GONE

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THE ENTIRE MANUFACTURING PLANT SWEEPED AWAY  
BY THE WATERS

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DEAD BODIES FLOATED BY IN STREAM, PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH AMONG THE DESTROYED.

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THOUSANDS IDLE THERE

MAGNIFICENT INDUSTRY WHICH HAS BEEN A MOST SUCCESSFUL ONE WASHED DOWN TORRENT OF PACOLET RIVER.

The worst damage so far reported was at Pacolet Mills. The water there had been rising for several days but the heavy downpour last night caused to be emptied into the river and its tributaries great volumes of water which rushed madly down stream, on their mission of destruction. The big three story mill, No. 1 at Pacolet went down about 9 o'clock this morning with an awful crash. Then the crowds of people about the spot and lining the high cliffs which overlook the mills, turned their attention to the large four-story mill No. 2, which stands adjoining No. 1 and which was even then half submerged in the angry waters. The crowd watched for an hour as the fate of the big mill hung in the balance, and then No. 2 went down with an awful, deafening crash and roar and within the short space of one hour or perhaps two hours a million dollars worth of property had been engulfed in the raging waters at Pacolet.

### BODIES FLOATING DOWN STREAM

At Pacolet this morning while hundreds of people watched the work of destruction wrought by the waters they were horrified to see the body of a woman cold in death, being carried down stream by the torrent. Near the woman and clinging to the wreckage was a little boy who called loudly for help as he

passed before the eyes of the gazing but helpless crowds watching the flood. An attempt was made to reach the child, but no one was able to brave the fury of the waters and the little fellow was carried down stream calling pitifully for help. The woman, it is said, was clad only in a night gown and had presumably been caught by the flood together with the house in which she was sleeping and had been borne down stream before help could reach her.

The waters made a sudden turn to the right and then to the left again, splashing and roaring and bearing down everything before them. All over the sea of angry waters could be seen the projecting tops of trees buried beneath the flood, while plank, wood and debris of every imaginable description could be seen floating down stream on the waters.

A message from Pacolet Mills at 1:30 o'clock stated that Pacolet No. 3 had gone down also. This mill is located about one-fourth mile below mills No. 1 and No. 2 and it is the largest of the three, containing 32,000 spindles, and the corresponding complements of looms. The number of spindles in Nos. 1 and 2 combined was 28,000, this number being 4,000 less than the number of spindles in No. 3. The loss of property is thus seen to be appalling.

While it will not be impossible to estimate the loss for some days, it is probable that the Pacolet Manufacturing Company alone will lose between \$1,000,000 and \$1,200,000.



In June, 1903, some of Pacolet properties in South Carolina sustained terrific losses as a result of floods. On June 10, 1903, the following statement appeared from Pacolet's president, reflecting the courage and determination of the company's leaders in those days, as well as today. The statement appears in an old issue of the *Gainesville News*.

## PACOLET TO BE REBUILT

President Victor M. Montgomery, in speaking of the future plans of the company, is quoted in an interview as saying:

"Pacolet Mill No. 3 will be rebuilt at once. We have already employed a large number of men and are giving all able-bodied people employment who can use a pick and clear debris. It will probably be three months until the mill is running again. Contracts will be signed at once for the completion and restoration of the mill. Pacolet is not near in such deplorable situation as Clifton. We lost mills No. 1 and 2 totally. Mill No. 3 was terribly damaged. But we lost no mill houses and none of the people suffered loss except that their opportunity to earn money has been destroyed until we get No. 3 running again.

"My plan is this: Instead of asking for cash contributions, which are really not now needed, we have asked all neighboring mills

to take our employees, pay their traveling expenses to their mills and give them employment for three months.

"I have asked all mills to consent to the scheme of aid rather than to make cash contributions, for you will at once see that it is better to get employment for idle people than to make them paupers by giving them money. There is absolutely no suffering at Pacolet at present.

"I believe employment is the keynote to the whole situation at Pacolet. Idleness is the working man's worst enemy. As soon as he is given work and realizes he is making money, he is happy and satisfied. While our loss is great in a financial way, I thank God that the loss of life is nothing like it was at Gainesville or at Clifton. We are face to face with a stern reality but we will meet it without delay or bitter complaint."



This scene taken with the photographer standing near where the present Rescue Squad building now stands. Hundreds of bales of cotton and cloth floated away with huge timber and machinery from Mills 1 and 2 during the flood of 1903. The bridge connecting both sides of the river went down also. The white painted stone cotton shed is the only building that stands today.



**This newspaper photo shows some of the damage done at Clifton Mills, upstream of Pacolet.**



**CLIFTON NO. 2 MILL** destruction is shown at left in the 1903 Pacolet River flood. Hundreds viewed the massive loss of property and life from a safe distance on the hillsides overlooking the mill. Fifty-three persons died near this mill. A total of 66 lost their lives in the flood. A group of workmen are shown in right photo, digging bales of cotton from the mud of Pacolet River near Clifton No. 2 Mill after the waters receded.

**In June, 2003, the Spartanburg Regional History Museum put together a special exhibit to mark the 100th anniversary of the flood. On June 5, 2003, the Spartanburg County News ran the following article about the flood exhibit.**



# DISASTER DISPLAY REMEMBERS PACOLET RIVER FLOOD THAT DESTROYED SIX MILLS



**Article done on June 5, 2003**



**JULIE WOODCOCK**  
STAFF WRITER

**I**t started as a gentle five-day rain that saturated the ground but didn't seem particularly alarming.

Then on the sixth day, the downpour began — the kind of hissing, pounding summer deluge that normally slacks off in minutes.

But that night it never slacked off.

Between seven and ten inches fell, washing over the earth in rivulets that grew as the hours wore on, spilling into streams and tributaries, tumbling into the Pacolet River until it swelled to a frothing roar.

By midnight of June 6, 1903, the Pacolet was eight feet above normal. By 4 a.m., it was 20 feet.

And then the destruction really began.

**Above, a textile mill stands in ruins after the Pacolet River flooded on June 6, 1903. The flood waters rose 20 feet above normal, destroying six textile mills in Pacolet and Clifton, as well as 70 homes, bridges, churches, businesses, and thousands of bales of cotton. At least 50 people were killed; entire families were wiped out when the flood hit in the middle of the night.**

**At right, Carolyn Creal, curator of Spartanburg's Regional History Museum, has put together an exhibit remembering the flood.**



In those early days of the twentieth century, textile mills were built along rivers so the current could be used to power



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equipment. But that night, the Pacolet became a savage foe, claiming bridges, churches, businesses, 60 homes, six textile mills, thousands of bales of cotton, and more than 50 lives.

One 7,000 pound card machine was picked up and carried three-quarters of a mile, while others were washed even greater distances. Out of 194 machines at one mill, only six were ever found.

"The force of water is incredible," said Pacolet mayor Elaine Harris, who has researched the flood. "It just shows you the power of nature. We never need to underestimate it."

People too, were swept away.

G.M. Hill was only eight years old at the time, and living on River Street near the Clifton mill where his parents worked. Years later, he recalled clinging to a bean stick as the water pounded his small body.

"I was holding on to that stick with all my strength. The water was so swift, it knocked my feet out from under me, and I was just swinging there

Hill watched the mill fall in.

"You don't think of things like this happening in Spartanburg County," said Spartanburg County Regional Museum of History curator Carolyn Creal. "Every time you have a lot of rain, the creeks flood. But you don't think of them doing something like this."

Beginning this week, the museum, located at 100 East Main Street, is hosting an exhibit remembering the 1903 Pacolet River flood, among other Spartanburg County disasters.

The 1977 collapse of the Andrews Building — which claimed five lives — a 1907 Spartan Mill village fire that destroyed seven blocks and 70 homes, and other blazes are also featured.

But the focus of the show is the Pacolet River disaster, the worst to strike Spartanburg County and possibly the worst flood the state has ever known.

Creal said some of the photos in the show have been donated to the museum over the years, while others were loaned from the collections of Converse College and the

one of the survivors, Creal said.

"We had a lady approach us about doing it," she said. "After the flood, her grandmother was listed as lost with four children. The four children were lost, but somehow she found something to hold on to and survived."

According to the exhibit, entire families died in two clusters of mill homes built near Clifton Mill #2. The homes were constructed in flat areas only about 15 feet above the water line.

Three Clifton mills were also destroyed, one of them after a 137-foot-tall brick stack washed over and fell on the building.

Debris and equipment from the destroyed mills and homes were carried downstream to do even more damage.

A 60-foot-high, 200-foot long train trestle was found destroyed, even though it had seemed sound when a train passed over it at 3 a.m. It's believed a house must have struck one of its supports,



because by morning, nothing remained of it except two stone abutments.

The damage to railway lines had sweeping implications, since Spartanburg was a major rail hub. The flood ended up disrupting train traffic up and down the east coast.

"Spartanburg is literally cut off from the world," announced the June 6, 1903 evening edition of The Spartanburg Journal.

The death toll was lower in the Pacolet area than further upstream.

A man was killed when he went out too far trying to rescue one of the 2,000 bales of cotton that were swept away.

Another 4,000 bales of manufactured goods were lost, according to the paper, along with three Pacolet mills.

Most of the foundation of the 600-foot-long double mill was demolished around 8 a.m. that morning. Workers, who'd been blocked from going to work by the rising water, watched helplessly from the opposite bank as it slowly crumbled and vanished beneath the water.

"The sight was one to

inspire awe in the breast of all who beheld the scene," the Journal story said.

Total damage from the Pacolet flood amounted to more than \$1 million; in today's dollars, the figure would have been much higher, Creal said.

Yet amazingly, she said, "They did rebuild, all of them."

Harris said the owner of the Pacolet Mill was determined to rebuild even bigger and better for his workers.

He rebuilt the mill village and constructed rock walls, and the stone amphitheater that is still in use today, along with sidewalks, a recreation hall, a barber shop, bowling alley, movie theater and a company store.

"His quote was that he wanted to build a showplace," Harris said. "And listening to the old timers, it truly was. You can hear it in their stories and you can see it in their faces as they talk about a way of life that was very special."

But still, immediately after the flood, workers were hit hard.

"(Owner) Mr. Montgomery asked that people not send

money to the workers, but to give them work," Harris said. "To me, it said a lot. It said, 'We're not just looking for a handout, but my people need work.' Of course you need help in a disaster, but you also need your dignity. Then he began to rebuild, and he built a showplace."

Mill and county officials also built new dams up and down the Pacolet to prevent such a flood from happening again. But even so, Harris said she respects the power of the river.

"When it rains at the town hall, we look out at the river and watch," she said. "We're in a gorge, which keep us out of the flood plane. But when nature is involved, it's something you never know."

She said it's important not to forget the lesson of June 6, 1903.

"Nature's very powerful, and you respect it and plan the best you can," Harris said. "And pray."

The show will run through Aug. 9. Admission is \$2 for adults, \$1 for students, and children five and under get in free.