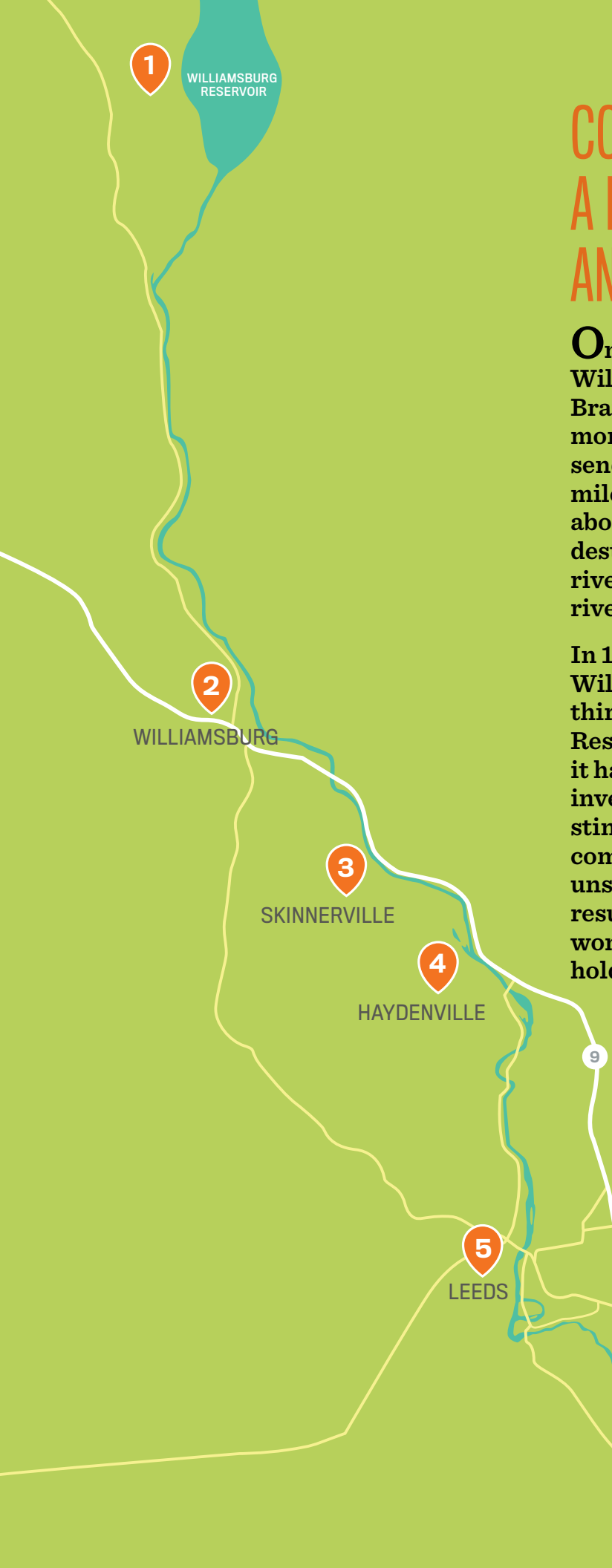
# THE 1874 MILL RIVER FLOOD DISASTER

Follow the flood's path from the remains of the Williamsburg Dam to Florence Meadows on that fateful morning in May when lives, mills, and villages were lost in a disaster that could have been prevented and for which none were held accountable.




Depiction of the 1874 Mill River Flood Disaster, by Theo. R. Davis for Harper's Weekly, June 6, 1874

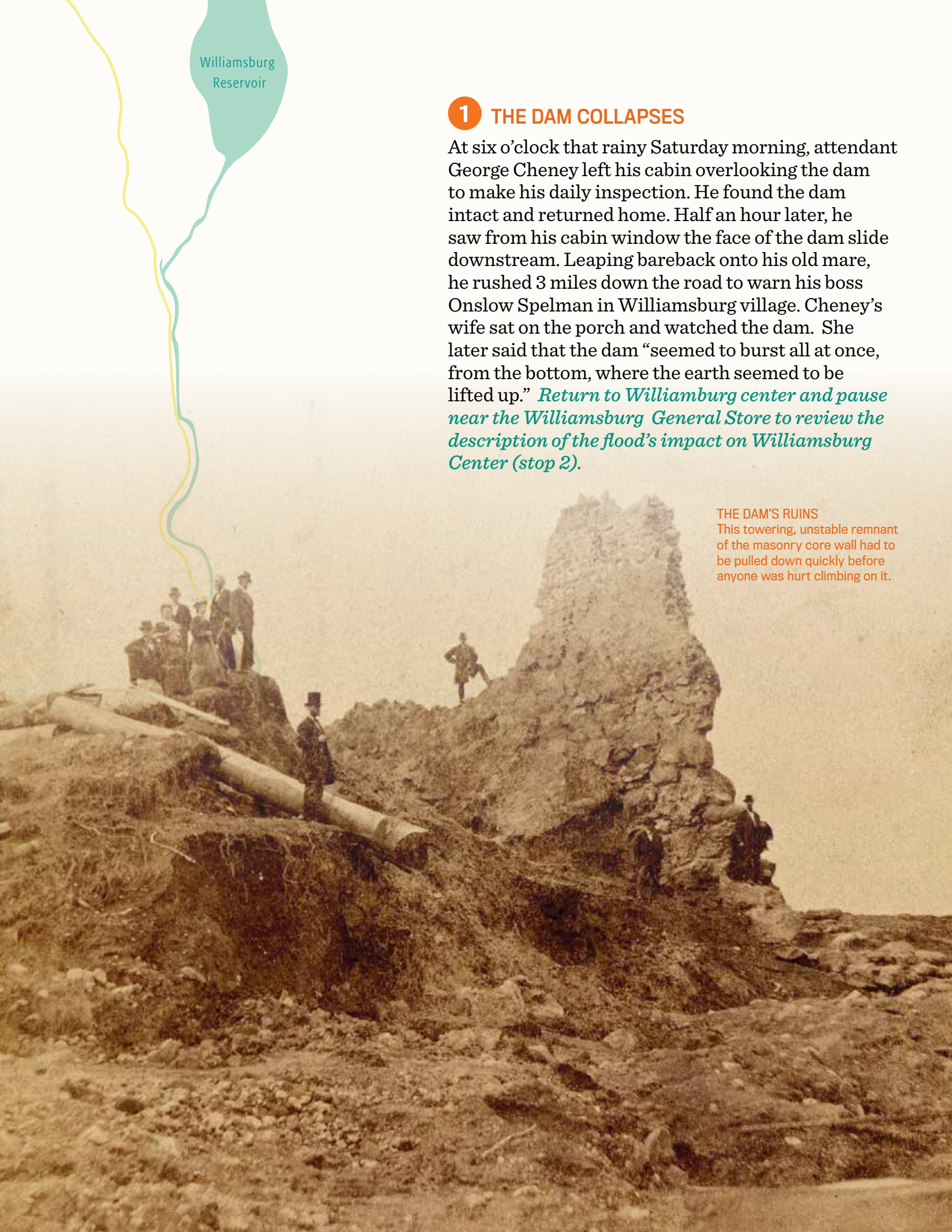



# CONSTRUCTING THE DAM: A LACK OF FORESIGHT AND OVERSIGHT

**On the morning of May 16th, 1874, the Williamsburg Reservoir dam high on the East Branch of the Mill River collapsed, releasing more than 600 million gallons of water and sending a wall of water, debris, and bodies 8 miles downstream to the village of Florence. In about two hours, the flood claimed 139 lives as it destroyed four Mill River villages and many of the riverside factories. The disaster and its aftermath riveted the American public's attention.**

**In 1874, the dams and reservoirs above Williasmburg provided water to power about thirty mill enterprises. The Williamsburg Reservoir dam was the largest. Completed in 1866, it had always leaked. Eleven local industrialists invested in the 43'-high, 600'-long dam, but their stinginess, hubris, and callous mismanagement, compounded by chiseling contractors, who used unsuitable materials and shoddy workmanship, resulted in an extremely unstable structure. No wonder it gave way 8 years later. Would anyone hold the dam owners and contractors responsible?**

*Directions: Start your tour at the parking pullout beside Ashfield Road just south of Judd Lane 2.8 miles north of the Williamsburg General Store. Take the 1-mile walk to the damsite and read the kiosk and wayside signs.*




## 1 THE DAM COLLAPSES

At six o'clock that rainy Saturday morning, attendant George Cheney left his cabin overlooking the dam to make his daily inspection. He found the dam intact and returned home. Half an hour later, he saw from his cabin window the face of the dam slide downstream. Leaping bareback onto his old mare, he rushed 3 miles down the road to warn his boss Onslow Spelman in Williamsburg village. Cheney's wife sat on the porch and watched the dam. She later said that the dam "seemed to burst all at once, from the bottom, where the earth seemed to be lifted up." *Return to Williamburg center and pause near the Williamsburg General Store to review the description of the flood's impact on Williamsburg Center (stop 2).*

THE DAM'S RUINS
This towering, unstable remnant of the masonry core wall had to be pulled down quickly before anyone was hurt climbing on it.



A view down what had been Mill Street, showing several trees with bark and branches battered off by debris to a height of about 20 feet.



After the flood, Rev. Gleason of the Congregational Church put up crude signs indicating the locations of vanished houses to help disoriented survivors find their way among places that had once been familiar. This one read "Dr. Johnson's -- six drowned."



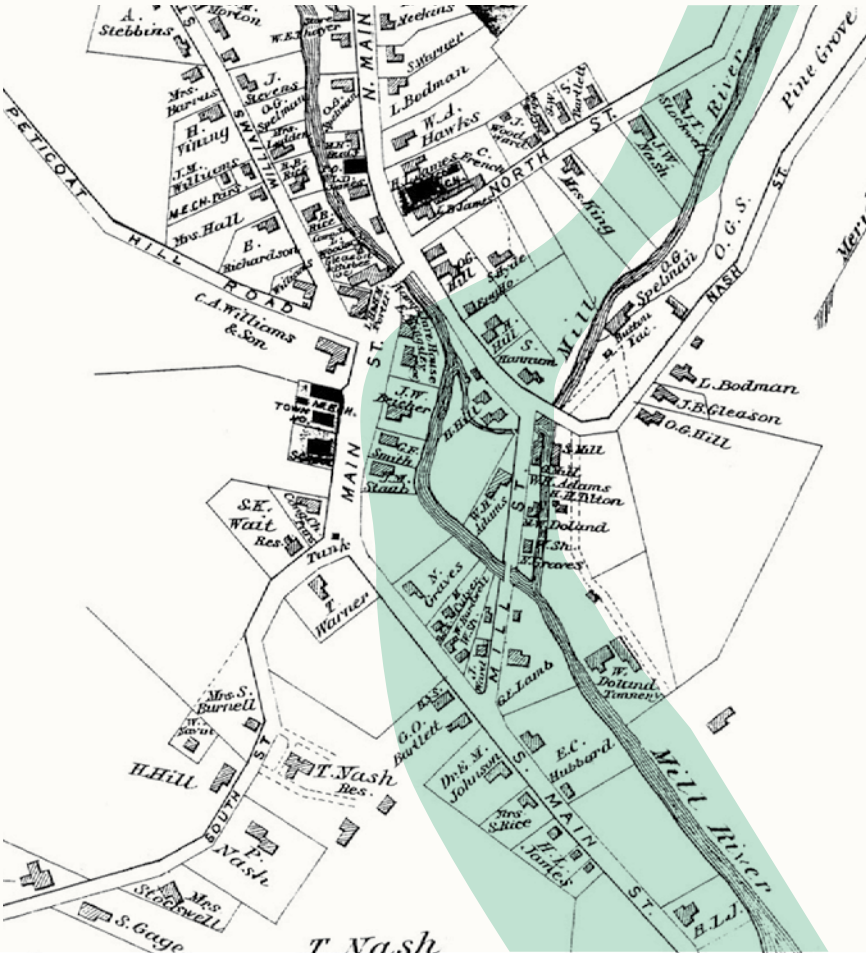
Looking downstream through what had been the lower half of the village from the grist mill site on Mill Street. This shows the new riverbed cutting across Main Street, and the area from which two dozen houses and more than 50 lives were erased.

## 2 WILLIAMSBURG CENTER

In Williamsburg village, Cheney wasted valuable time convincing Spelman of the impending peril and that someone needed to warn the valley below. As Cheney waited precious minutes for a fresh mount, the floodwave arrived and cut off his route. Fortunately, passing farmer Collins Graves had heard about the danger from Cheney and raced downstream to warn the villagers in Skinnerville and Haydenville. The 20-foot-high floodwave roared through town as a wall of water containing trees, houses, bridges, fences, mill buildings, dead animals "and, fearful to relate, human bodies — men, women, and little children...bruised, stripped of their clothing, and battered almost beyond recognition." (Hampshire Gazette 5/26/1874) Fifty-seven in Williamsburg center lost their lives.

*Head east out of Williamsburg center on Route 9. Note that the flood entered the village to your left, demolishing nearly everything in the area shaded blue on the village map. It crossed Route 9 where the used car lot is now, excavated a new riverbed through what is now the Highway Dept. yard, and swept away two dozen houses on both sides of the road. Nothing was left standing here, and the river had to be diverted back into its original bed on the north side of Route 9 in the months that followed. Continue 1.2 miles down Route 9 to the ice cream stand on the left at the "Village Green."*

*The shading on the maps below indicates the width of the flood's path.*





A panoramic overview of the devastation here shows Skinner's empty mill site on the riverbank in the foreground, with his mansion beyond and, to its right, the few houses that were left, tossed around like toys on the floodplain north and east of the river.



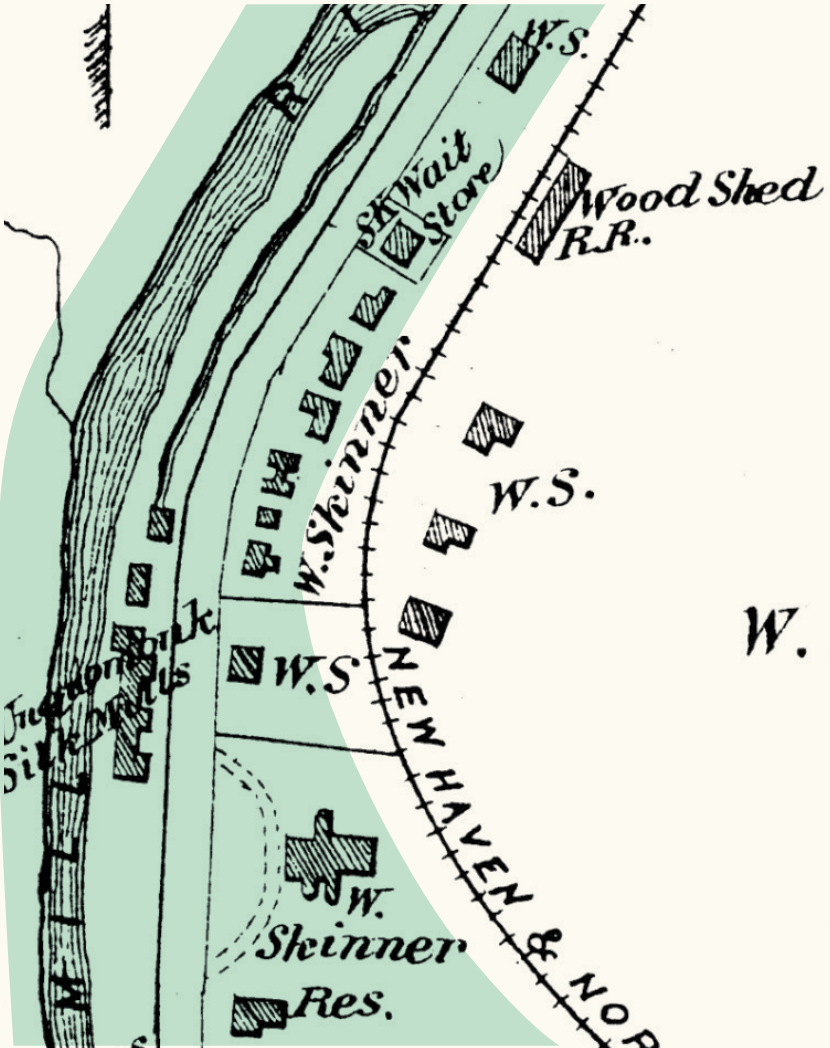
Skinner's water turbine, seen here, and the flywheel for his steam engine were the only pieces of his machinery too heavy to be swept away. Apart from them, his mill site was stripped bare.

## 3 SKINNERVILLE

At William Skinner's thriving silk mill a mile below Williamsburg village, Collins Graves shouted a warning of the oncoming flood as he rushed by. Behind him was what one resident mistook for "a huge cloud of thick smoke," actually the torrent's filthy spray. Almost all the silk workers were saved when they rushed up to the elevated railroad grade. The flood swept through in 15 minutes. "Where half an hour before had been an enviable industrial village, busy with orders of colorful silk thread to be filled, there was now a mud-swept landscape strewn with timber and rocks, raked utterly clear of [any] trace of life." (Kilborne, 55) Four were left dead. A plaque marks the flood's passage near the ice-cream stand, but little else remains of the village. Even Skinner's elegant mansion was moved to Holyoke where it now stands as Wistariahurst Museum.

*Continue 0.6 miles down Route 9 and turn right into the parking lot of Haydenville's Brass Works.*

*The shading on the map below indicates the width of the flood's path.*

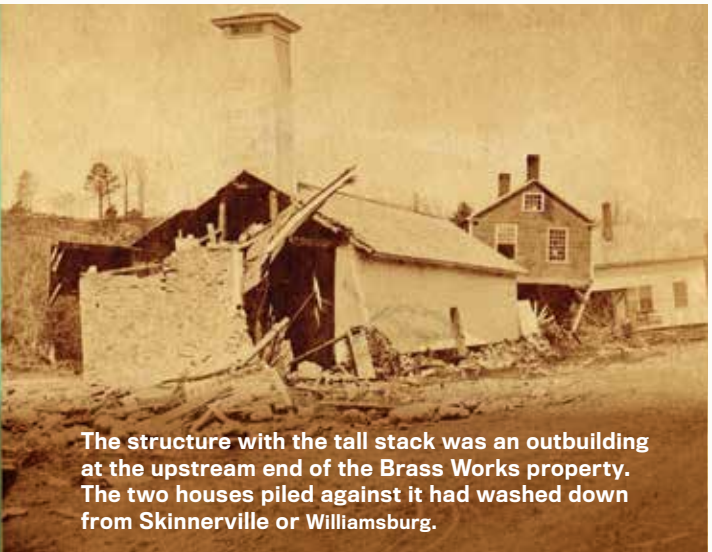




The only standing remnant of the 400-foot-long brick Brass Works was this small portion at the upstream end. Pinkerton guards hired by owner Joel Hayden Jr. watched for looters.



Despite the total loss of his business, Hayden kept his employees on the payroll for weeks or months, scouring the riverbed and banks for salvageable brass goods, patterns, tools, and even reusable bricks. The main building at the Brass Works had stretched nearly all the way across this scene before the flood.

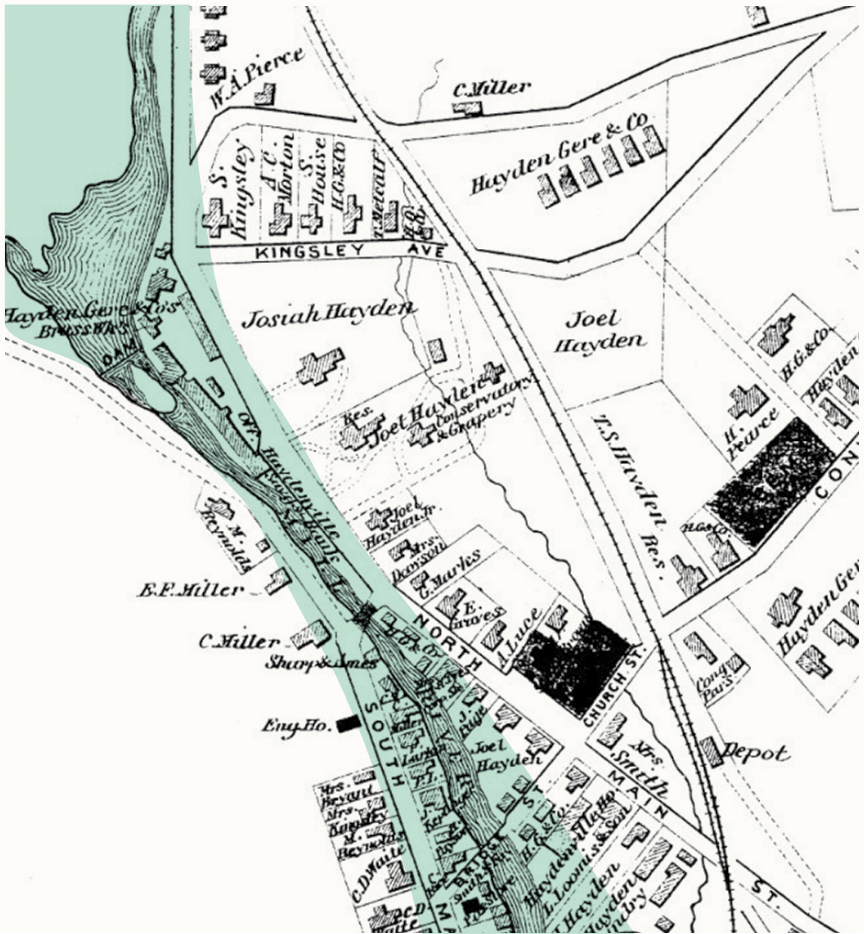


**The structure with the tall stack was an outbuilding at the upstream end of the Brass Works property. The two houses piled against it had washed down from Skinnerville or Williamsburg.**

## 4 HAYDENVILLE

On rushed Collins Graves to warn workers at the Brass Works, but he was rebuffed by the superintendent there who insisted it would take the flood days to arrive. Feeling foolish,
Graves headed back upriver until he saw in the distance the flood hit Skinnerville. He raced back to Haydenville and gave the alarm to all he saw. "The air seemed to be full of flying timber. Great trees were turning end for end; now their enormous roots were in the air, and then he would see their trunks and branches whirling round. At the top of the perpendicular wall of water, advancing down the valley, 30 feet high, [10 feet higher than at Williamsburg center] were seen houses and barns turning over." (Sharpe, 72) Most of the workers in the factories had time to flee the buildings, but many women and children, mostly Québécois, were trapped in their houses and perished. As for the Brass Works, "The rush of water emptied all nine buildings of machinery, raw materials, patterns, molds, and finished goods, and then dissolved the buildings. One writer said that the Brass Works melted away 'like a pyramid of sugar in hot water, sinking out of sight almost instantly.' All that was left was the center section of the brick upper shop and a smokestack from the boiler." (Sharpe, 74). The flood claimed 27 lives here. *Continue down Route 9 and quickly turn right at the little Haydenville Library. Cross the Mill River, and turn left onto South Main Street. Drive another 1.3 miles to a stop sign with ChartPak on your left. Turn left onto Mulberry St. and immediately turn left into the ChartPak parking lot.*

*The shading on the map below indicates the width of the flood's path.*





A view over the Middle Dam and down Main Street from the west abutment of the demolished Mulberry Street bridge. The post-flood Silk Mill Apartments building blocks this view today.



The flood cleared the button mill site of everything but the smokestack. This view looking northwest from the railroad grade shows the big eastward oxbow bend in the river, which the flood ignored and flowed straight south.



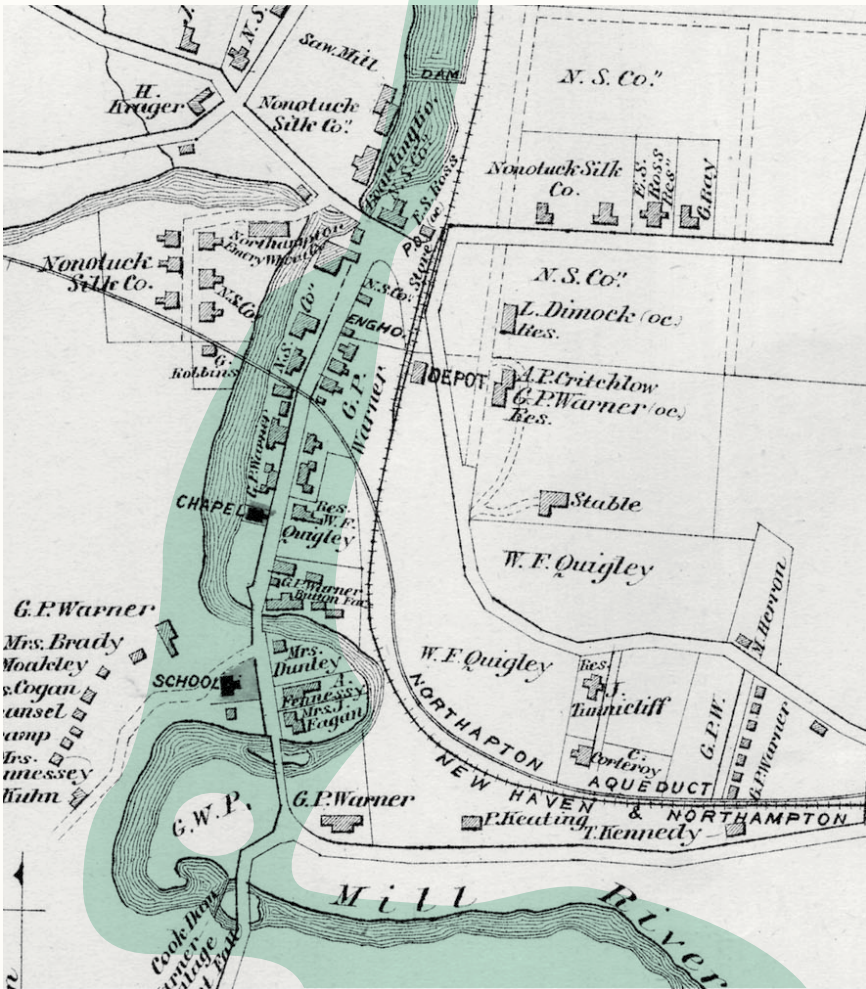
This photo looks eastward over the remains of Cook's Dam toward the bluff formed by the railroad grade east of what is now Look Park.

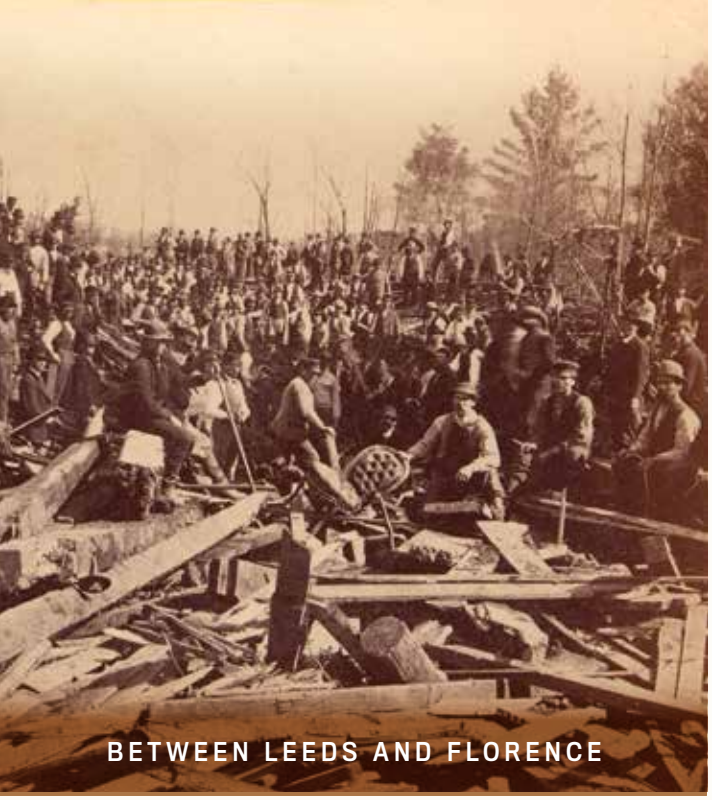
## 5 LEEDS

The flood had caught up to Collins Graves in Haydenville where he wheeled up the hill to safety. Myron Day took up the alarm, racing downstream to warn the people of Leeds, focusing on the silk mill and button factory. Many in Leeds were caught without warning in the terrible wave that was filled with yet more trees, buildings, and the bodies of the dead. Fred Howard, a boxmaker, who ushered workers out of the button mill, described the fearful scene: "The whole valley was a wild torrent filled with men, women, and children, horses and cattle, trees and broken houses, the former waving their hands and crying for help till some timber struck them and either killed them outright or pushed them under and drowned them...You must remember that all this occurred in a very short time, probably in one minute after I first saw the water..." (Sharpe, 82). Only 3 of 35 buildings on Main Street were left standing, and 51 villagers were lost, mostly women and children.

*Leeds historic walking tour brochures are available in the Leeds P.O. lobby. Take an hour to follow the Leeds historic riverwalk brochure with its signage along the way. Turn left out of the parking lot onto Mulberry St. Just over the bridge, turn right down Main St. and follow it to its end at Arch St. Curve right onto Spring St. and cross the river over Cook's Dam. Continue down Meadow St. to the parking lot at the end of soccer fields before the yellow house. Total distance from ChartPak to Florence Fields is 2 miles.*

*The shading on the map below indicates the width of the flood's path.*





BETWEEN LEEDS AND FLORENCE

As many as 1200 workers searched the debris field for bodies for some days following the disaster. About 200 are shown in this photo. A vast debris field blanketed many acres of what are now the Northampton Country Club and Look Park. Even after all the lumber, trees and brush had been collected and salvaged or burned, the sand and gravel left by the flood ruined valuable farmland for decades afterward.

Damage in Florence was minor compared with that in the upstream villages. The newly-constructed Nonotuck Silk Mill dam held fast, but parts of several wooden buildings were swept away.





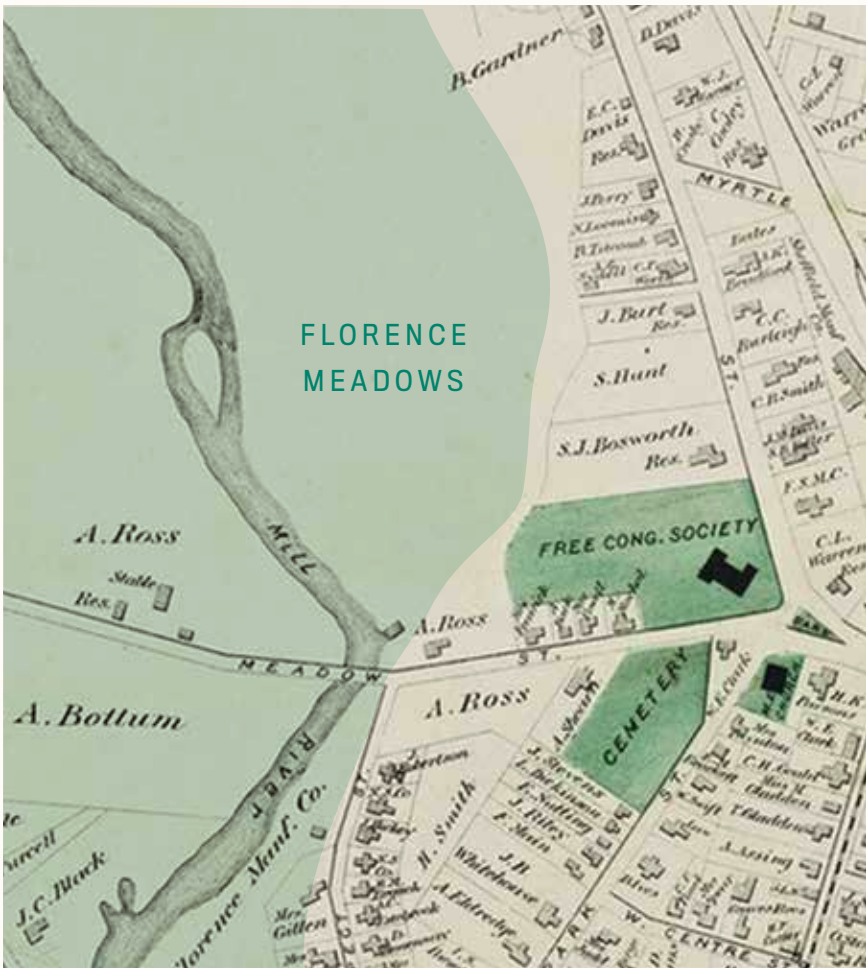
The iron bridge that had carried Pine Street over the river was left a crumpled, shapeless mass, like many others along the flood's path.

## 6 FLORENCE MEADOWS

When the flood roared into Leeds, storekeeper Edson Ross jumped on his horse and galloped down to the home of his father Austin Ross at the south end of Florence Meadows. The river drops 100 feet over the quarter mile between Leeds and Florence, so the floodwave was accelerating as it plunged over the the 30-foot drop at Cook's Dam. There it finally slowed as it spread out across Ross's broad fields. Mud and gravel two to three feet deep covered Florence Meadows, topped with six feet of debris and the sad remains of those lost in the villages upstream. Large cobbles from upstream still litter the fields. Damage downstream was limited to some wooden buildings at the Silk Mill and three bridges. Austin Ross' yellow farmhouse still stands at 123 Meadow St.

Five days after the flood, the county coroner began an inquest which lasted seven days. A jury heard a full accounting from scores of witnesses about the dam's construction and the reasons for its failure. In its verdict on July 3, the jury charged five parties with abrogating their responsibilities: 1. The Massachusetts legislature for lax laws; 2. The dam owners for privileging profit over lives; 3. The engineers for poor design; 4. The contractors for poor construction; 5. The County commissioners for lack of oversight. With so many parties named, the blame stuck to no one. No criminal or civil suits were carried out, and none of the responsible parties were penalized or held accountable.

*The shading on the map below indicates the width of the flood's path.*



## ABOUT THIS PROJECT

# THE RIVER RUNS THROUGH US...

The **Mill River Greenway Initiative** and **Smith College** are creating a series of self-guided riverwalks along the Mill River in Northampton and Williamsburg, Massachusetts. Our goal is to celebrate the river, attract residents and visitors to its natural and historic heritage, and spur action to preserve and enhance the river's treasures.

In this brochure, co-sponsored by the **Leeds Civic Association** and **Friends of Northampton Trails and Greenways**, we focus on the extraordinary mill history of Leeds and the impact the Mill River had on the village's woolen, button, and silk mills situated along it. We welcome you to join the Mill River Greenway Initiative and add your voice and support in our efforts to open up the river for exploration and recreation.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:** This brochure is based on the work of **Elizabeth Sharpe**, author of **In The Shadow of the Dam**. **Eric Weber** of the Williamsburg Historical Society selected the photos and helped edit the text along with **Ralmon Black**. **Amaya Ramsay-Malone** (Smith '20) developed the text from material provided by Elizabeth Sharpe. **Heidi Stevens** designed the brochure based on the design of the first Mill Riverwalk provided by **Transit Authority Figures**. **John Sinton** of MRGI and **Paul Jahnige** of the Williamsburg Woodland Trails Committee are responsible for the execution and content of the brochure.

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millrivergreenway.org

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