

THE FLOOD OF 1916



Bat Cave and Chimney Rock Catastrophe (Reprinted from the *Charlotte News*)

“Not in another hundred years, could a like disaster happen to the Bat Cave region, no matter how heavy the rains,” said W. S. Fallis, chief engineer of the state highway commission, in Asheville after walking twenty-five miles through the heart of the Blue Ridge devastated by the floods of July 16.

“Out of the seventeen miles of the highway,” said Mr. Fallis, “possibly five miles will have to be rebuilt. There are many gaps of from 200 to 300 feet in length absolutely gone. The bridges are all out. The terrific mountain slides were responsible for most of the damage and loss of life. The greater part of the damage was caused by the mountain slides. I suppose I saw the effects of more than 300 of these slides. They appeared to have started close to the top of the mountains. For a distance of possibly from seventy-five to 200 feet in which they removed everything clear and clean in their paths. It would be quite impossible to convey any idea

of the terrific force of these slides. Everything movable in their path was swept to the river below. Trees were denuded absolutely of every vestige of bark. Rocks were ground smooth. Buildings were carried away in the irresistible rush. Nature had been long preparing the mountains for the catastrophe, and not for a hundred years could such another disaster happen to the mountains there, no matter how hard, or how long it might rain.”

“For long stretches,” added Mr. Fallis, “the river gorge is not more than one-eighth of a mile in width, with many sheer walls 1,200 feet and more high. During the storm from this narrow gorge an inferno of noises escaped to the starless sky above—and men who never before have known fear felt its cold hand clutch their hearts that night.”

The highway engineer speaks of one slide, which starting slowly close to the summit of the mountain, carried away the home of E. B. Huntley. In that mountain home were the father, the mother, and their two children

“Lights were burning there, for their cheer was needed, and around the hearthstone before a smoldering

fire were gathered the little family. From below came the never-ceasing clamor of the infuriated river hurling unimaginable masses of water and rocks against the mountainside. But suddenly above the outcry of the river below was heard a still more terrific tumult above them, on the side of the mountain. It stilled all other noises, and with it came shocks which shook the dwelling and the world upon which it rested. Closer and closer came that crashing horror, and almost before the family knew of its coming it was upon them.

“The man of the house staggered to the door—opened it—and in some fashion or another, stumbled outside. Before his little family could follow, the slide had torn their home from where it had rested for many years, and hurled it over and over again. The man lived. The mother was found later, close to the brink of the river. She was hanging, head downwards, with one foot caught in the crotch of a tree. The children were found later, too. Mother and children now rest in a common grave, close by a laurel thicket near where their home once stood.

“The path of the slide is cleared of all vegetation to the living rock. Not a blade, a bush, a tree remains. In many instances so terrific was the force of that rush of earth and rocks that it possessed the characteristics of a glacier, and ground the very rocks themselves smooth. In one case, at the home of J. M. Flack, the slide came down, carried off the earth upon which rested the pig pens of the owner of the farm carried pigs and pen to the bottom of the mountain and there covered them up under masses of rock and earth. But the next day the hogs had rooted themselves free of their prison and are now none the worse for their experience.”

“In another instance,” says Mr. Fallis, “the torrent excavated all the dirt from around an eighteen-foot well, leaving the well high and dry above the surrounding ground with its stone walls still intact. Instead of a



well it is now a column of stone set in the midst of a boulder-strewn field.”

Speaking specifically of still another instance of the flood's pranks, the engineer refers to a field completely covered with large and small boulders. This was once a fertile five-acre patch of corn. It is now covered completely with rocks, and not a vestige of dirt is visible.

The Tragic Story Of Bat Cave.

Nowhere was destruction more appalling, more sudden, and complete, and loss of life more horrible, than in the famous Bat Cave and Chimney Rock section;

Capt. John T. Patrick, well known as a promoter of big enterprises in North Carolina, and in recent years identified with development at Chimney Rock, arrived in Asheville from the latter point Wednesday having walked from Chimney Rock to Fairview, and coming from the latter place in a buggy. Capt. Patrick arrived attired in overalls, and wearing but one shoe, all his cloth-

ing and other belongings having gone in the rush of the Rocky Broad river, which had played havoc with both lives and property in all the section. Captain Patrick said the storm there began Friday, torrents of rain falling so heavily that one could see only a few yards. The destruction began Saturday, and not only was the rain heavier there than on this side the mountain, but the destruction was vastly greater in proportion to the number of homes and business enterprises involving.

“By 6 o'clock Saturday afternoon,” said Captain Patrick, “the river was in full flood, and building after building was swept away, not only on the lowlands, but even on the mountain water filling every low place and ev-sides, where there were torrents or en pouring like waterfalls down that channels 30 and 40 feet deep, from summit to valley. The landslides were numbered by scores, 25 to 200 feet in width, sweeping boulders and full grown trees before them.

“Seven persons are known to have lost their lives in the flood, at Chimney

Rock and vicinity. In one case a dwelling was torn away in which was a young woman and two children. The children were saved, but the body of the young woman, Miss Stacey Hill, was found far below the site of her dwelling, laying head down, her foot caught in the crotch of a tree.

“The horrors of that night cannot be told. The rain fell in such solid masses that one seemed to be under a waterfall, and it not only undermined houses but actually tore them to pieces. The noise of the rain was like continuous thunder, added to the roar of the river and the shock of the mountain sides literally crashing into the valleys. It was in fact a cataclysm, such as these mountains have probably not experienced in recent geographical periods. The forces of nature setting themselves to a gigantic movement simply paralyzed anything that man could do and literally stunned imagination. The people who went through that awful night can never forget the shock of it.

“Throughout the night there were hours of horror, and when daylight

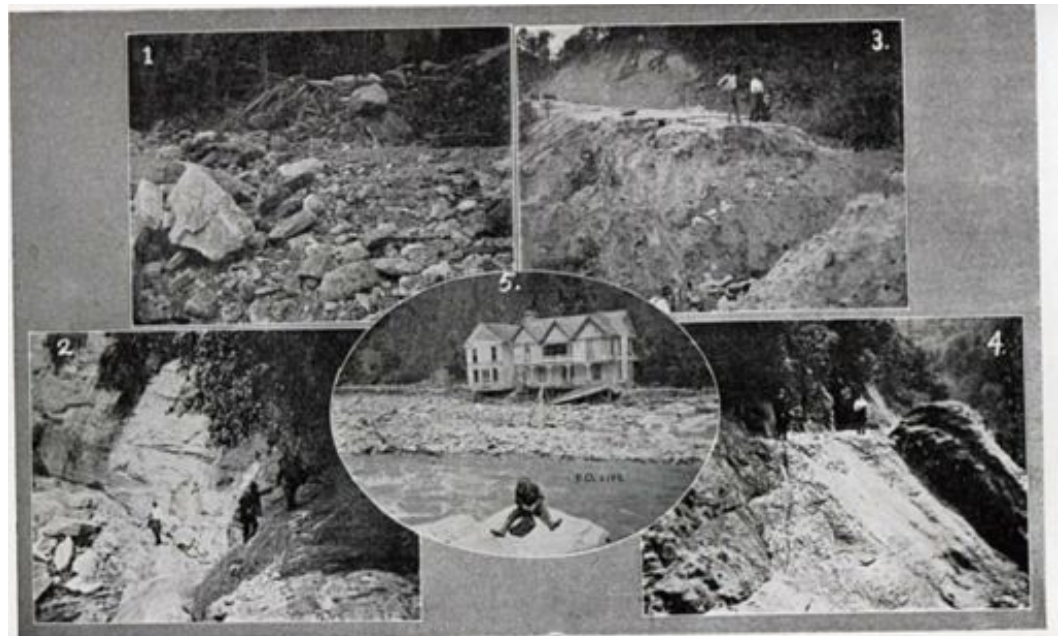
came the worst scene of desolation ever viewed in the mountain became visible. The river began to recede, at times, and then, strange to say, would suddenly rise again, walls of water coming down the river like an ocean tide, with the thunderous noise of waves beating on a rocky coast. The greatest height of the water was reached at between 10 o'clock and midnight Saturday night.

“At Bat Cave every store was carried off. The utter destruction or the river wiped out everything. The river has widened to two or three times its usual width. Only houses built deep in the mountain sides are standing at Bat Cave.

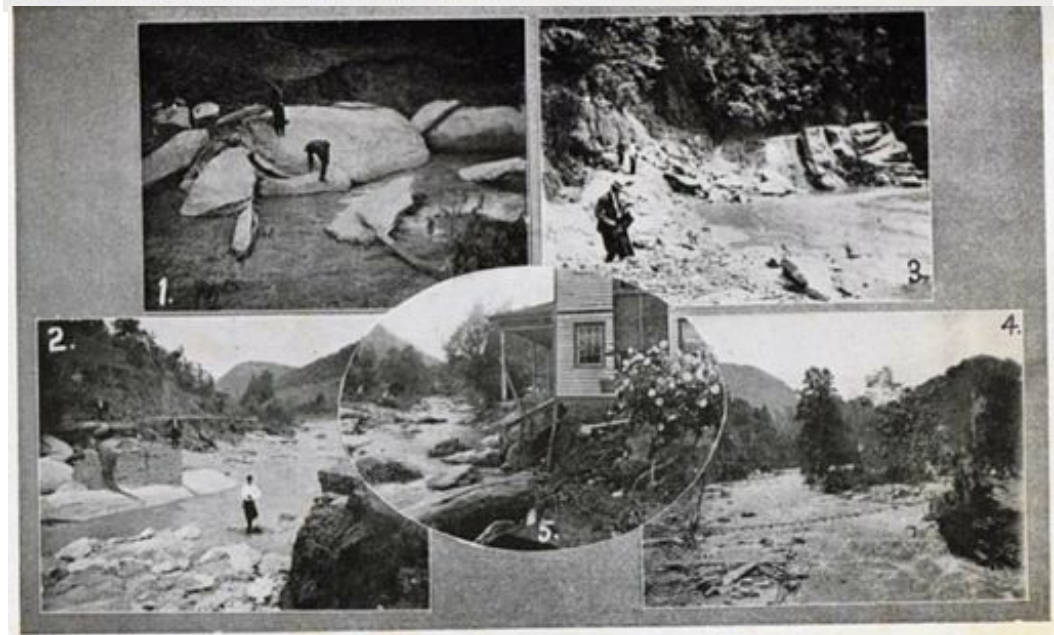
“The state has had for months a special force of convicts building a splendid highway between Asheville and Rutherfordton through the Hickory Nut Gap. Great stretches of this are obliterated. Bridges and high banks of earth have been replaced by holes in the ground. The aspect of the valley, in many respects one of the most scenic in North Carolina, has been in many respects changed.

“Isaac Connor, a very old man, was at Tilton Freeman's home. They left their house to go to the barn which seemed to be on a safer site. Water undermined the barn, and as they hurried back to the house the old man got separated from them and was drowned in the flood, and a baby of Freeman, in it's mother's arms was torn from her grasp, lost and never found.”

Dr. L. B. Morse, who arrived at Hendersonville Tuesday night after walking with great difficulty from Chimney Rock, stated that the island at Chimney Rock was completely gone. All bridges between Hendersonville and Bat Cave and Chimney Rock were gone. Mr. Morse walked for 18 hours to reach Hendersonville



SCENES OF DESTRUCTION AT BAT CAVE AND CHIMNEY ROCK.
 (1) Mountains of rock covering State highway. (2) A mountain slide of rock completely covering State highway. (3) A washout on State highway. No streams near. (4) Solid rock cut five feet deep on State highway washed away, showing hole 20 feet deep back in mountain of rock. (5) Freeman's Inn and store, only buildings left. Showing where postoffice and twelve other buildings stood. New main channel of river.



SCENES AT BAT CAVE AND CHIMNEY ROCK.
 (1) Rocks washed down from mountains. (2) Abutment of a bridge, built of rock and on rock foundation, washed eight feet down stream out of line of abutment on opposite bank. (3) Showing State highway built in solid rock washed away. (4) Bridge on State highway entirely gone. (5) Showing Reedy Patch creek in new channel washed away entire valley and part of home.

and was one of the first to bring news from the Chimney Rock and Bat Cave section.

According to Dr. Morse the flood situation at these places was alarming among the buildings destroyed were the village stores.

Telephone connection with Bat Cave and Chimney Rock was impossible. Many telephone and telegraph wires, including those to Fairview and small villages along the Swanna-

noa river which were operating for a short period last night were down. The Asheville-Charlotte highway near Bat Cave and the scenic road from the main line to the base 01 Chimney Rock was completely washed away. Dr. Morse was one of the owners of the scenic road which is reported to have cost \$25,000.



ENLARGE ON YOUR SCREEN TO STUDY DETAILS



NEWSPAPER CLIPPING FROM 1923: “Showing the Rocky Broad River as it passes Bat Cave. The old-fashioned covered bridge is of a style rarely seen these days. They were covered on the theory that a load which could pass under would not break the bridge down”—photo by Higgason. *This bridge was built after the 1916 Flood.*



1967 NEWSPAPER CLIPPING: “1916 in Hickory Nut Valley at Bat Cave after Great Flood wiped out people and livestock, destroyed whole roads, such as the above shows. Photo was made near present intersection of Highway 9 & 74, showing old Bat Cave Inn, left, burned in 1936. The entire front lawn was washed away, 2-story house to right of center is old Duval House, center is what was left of road, Pauline Freeman, Later Mrs. Chas. Sumner is believed to be girl in foreground, daughter of B. F. “Doc” Freeman.

1967 NEWSPAPER CLIPPING “Another 1916 Photo Showing Devastation of Flood Wiping Out the roadbed at Bat Cave. House on left was old Summer house, later torn down; next is DeWitt Freeman House, third is old Scott house, later Glenn Freeman and on right is old Rosser house. Second and fourth still stand today. (photos courtesy Mrs. Pauline Sumner, Bat Cave.”

NOTE: When you enlarge these photos on your screen, you get terrific details.

**Letter from M.H. Justice to James Mills Flack
Dated July 31, 1916 and offering aid to Flood Victims**

Rutherfordton, T. C. July 31, 1916.

Mr. Mills Flack,
Chilcote, Tenn., T. C.

Dear Mr. Flack:-

You are very much more familiar with conditions in your community than I am.

It strikes me that if you can get good men along the river and on Buffalo, Billie Creek and Cedar Creek and about Young's Mountain and in those sections where the people suffered most and who are in need, to go and work the road and get some sort of out-let for the people, and at the same time give them employment, it would be about as good plan to dispense charity as I know.

If you think you can take \$100.00 or \$500.00 and give these people employment and enable them to help themselves, and at the same time give them an out-let, I believe I will furnish you that much money. Write me by the bearer what you think of it.

I am sending you a thousand pounds of flour and two-hundred pounds of bacon, and I hope you will send word around to people who are in need and let them come and get it. I trust you can reach people on the creeks and in the sections that I have mentioned.

I want to ask you to keep an itemized statement of who gets this stuff, and the quantity, and where it is convenient for you, give me a little statement of their condition.

Please reply to this by the bearer.

Yours very truly,

M. H. Justice

M.H.J.-F

P.S. If you had a bushel or two of early valentine beans, do't you think that you could distribute them around through the country and let the people plant them now? They will bear by the middle of September.

M.H.J.

What are Valentine Beans?