



# The Johnstown Flood of 1889 (Great Historic Disasters)

*Rachel A. Koestler-Grack*

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On May 31, 1889, the people of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, got the surprise of the century, one that claimed the lives of more than 2,200 men, women, and children. In the mountains that overlooked the booming coal-and-steel town, the restless waters of Lake Conemaugh churned behind the South Fork Dam, a hastily built earthen structure. The soft rain that had been falling that afternoon took an angry turn, filling the belly of Lake Conemaugh over capacity. In a matter of hours, the lake began spilling over the top and ultimately burst its earthen restraints. Like a roaring hurricane, 20 million tons of water cascaded down the Conemaugh Valley, stripping the landscape raw and eating up any scrap of life in its path. Lake Conemaugh's final destination was Johnstown, where its effects are still felt by the people who live there. The horrible tragedy of the Johnstown Flood quickly turned into one of the nation's hottest scandals and taught a powerful lesson to the people of the Conemaugh Valley.

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