

## SPECIAL EDITION: The Flood History of Middletown

### Add Another Flood to the History Books



Main Street, Margaretville, August 28, 2011, as seen from the Catskill Watershed Corporation building.

When Tropical Storm Irene dumped anywhere from eight to 14 inches on parts of the Catskills August 28, she left misery and mind-boggling damage in her wake. By now we are all too familiar with the videos of 400-pound round hay bales bobbing down Margaretville's Main Street, school buses floating away in Windham, stately Victorian homes tipped on their sides in devastated Prattsville, the remnants of the motel where an elderly woman was swept to her death in Fleischmanns.

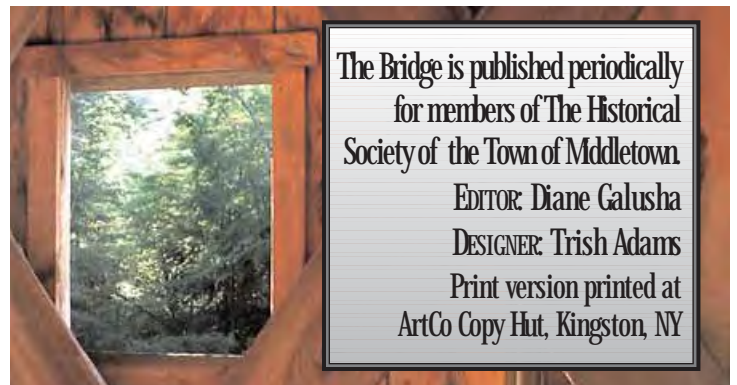
These apocalyptic images, and the reality of the suffering caused by this amazing flood, have prompted many to wonder why it happened; to want to blame someone or something; to call for stream dredging and levy building; and of course to debate the obvious: Do we rebuild in the flood plain? Or clear it and let the river have its way?

We are not the first to agonize over these issues. The simple truth is, Middletown and the rest of the Catskills are criss-crossed with streams that course down steep mountains into

narrow valleys – the perfect setup for flash floods and disaster when Mother Nature gets her back up.

A search in the online *Catskill Mountain News* yielded 852 documents with the word “flood,” and that’s only covering 47 years (1902-1949)! Here are some of the highlights. Except for the references to trains and horses, you’ll notice a certain grim similarity with the news accounts that followed Irene.

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# Floods reported in the Catskill Mountain News

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## The Flood of 1901

From the *Utilitarian* of December 20, 1901, reprinted in *Catskill Mountain News* October 14, 1932:

Last Sunday, Dec. 15, will long be remembered as the greatest flood. Never in the recollection of the oldest inhabitant was there a flood so high and so disastrous. An all day's rain melted the two feet of snow in the mountains and at 3 p.m. there started to be high water. During the evening, the rain came down in torrents and by midnight caused much anxiety. At two o'clock it was deemed necessary to arouse the whole town and fire chief Rotermund sounded the fire alarm and in a few minutes the streets were filled with grim visaged men helpless to stop the angry waters. The Hotel Bouton barn was swung from its foundations, *The Utilitarian* office immediately followed the barn and careened over on its side. The fair grounds were wrecked. The bowling alley lost its foundation. Olympic Ave. (now named Bridge St.) is nothing but a series of holes. Both iron bridges on Walnut and Swart Street are wrecked. The bridge over the Binnekill at the bank corner is torn away. The actual damage from the flood is placed at \$20,000.



This building between the Bun & Cone and Freshtown supermarket plaza, has been used as a garage, storage building, retail shops (including Now & Then Video) and restaurants. But it was built as a livery stable (note the hay door midway up the wall). For many years it was owned and operated by Marcel Anderson who held horse, carriage and tack sales there into the 1920s. Beginning in 1904 Anderson also ran the hotel next door, which later became Mattino's Meat Market. The building's foundation was undermined on August 28, and so, after surviving countless Bridge Street floods for more than a century, it was demolished.

## Bull Run Again Rampant — July 24, 1902

An unusually severe rain storm visited Margaretville late Sunday afternoon and for the third time within a year has Bull Run been on the rampage. . . . Water just dropped down upon us in chunks and it thundered on the housetops like the measured tread of a mighty army. Heavy claps of thunder shook the buildings and sharp streaks of lightning split the darkened air . . . The passage under the Swart street bridge became choked and the torrent assaulted it as with a battering ram, raising the heavy planks and iron railing at the upper end high in the air as easily as a child tosses a ball, finally ripping it out altogether, but without displacing the lower end of the structure. It flowed knee-deep across Swart street and in the rear of houses of William Hilton, Samuel Halpern, Dr. Allaben (where it drowned several chickens), James Mungle and Thomas Winter. About twenty cords of wood belonging to S. Halpern were washed away. . .

## Deluged by an Ice Flood; More History Made by Bull Run on Friday Night — January 29, 1904

The January thaw that came near losing its place on the calendar came along on Friday and enabled Bull Run to furnish another chapter of history. . . . A few minutes before 9 o'clock excited cries startled dwellers on Main street, and those who raised their windows and listened heard Robert Holmes, the butcher man, say: "Bull Run's 'busted' and she's coming down Walnut street and the Hill House is flooded!" Sure enough! The steep side hills up Bull Run had "let go" and an avalanche of water-logged snow and ice descended upon us with irresistible force. . . It pounded out the front of Mr. Gilbert's barn and packed the entire ground floor with ice four feet deep as solidly as if frozen there. It filled the stalls as well and drove one of the horses up into the manger, where he was afterward found in a state of terror. It crushed the carriages together like egg shells and forced another endwise nearly to the door overhead. The horses were released from their perilous position through a hole cut in the siding. There were easily a hundred tons of ice in the structure. . . . The flood forced open the door in the Ackerly House basement and spread two feet of ice and water on the floor in each room. It took Ed Dudley, the clerk, completely by surprise; and it is said that when the cuspidors began to move across the floor like mammoth

# Floods reported in the Catskill Mountain News

cock roaches he grabbed his overcoat and lit out for Grand Gorge. And he hasn't been seen since!

## Spring Freshet Floods Village — March 22, 1912

There was considerable excitement in the village and many moved up stairs or were careful to fasten all floating articles that were loose. . . The only damage that resulted here was the taking away of the Fair Ground bridge (the covered bridge that stood where the current Fair Street bridge is) and the tearing out of the road in front of the News building (Bridge Street). The Fair Ground bridge was found the next day on Mrs. E. F. Keeneys' flat and was drawn back to the place from where the flood carried it. None of the timbers were broken and the bridge can be re-erected at a small cost. Had it been securely braced it would not have been floated away.

## Sunday's Rain Brought Flood and Damage — August 27, 1915

Locally the storm was worst in the vicinity of Fleischmanns. The Red Kill section suffered a "cloudburst" and it will take \$1,000 to repair the damage there alone. Docking and bridge abutments were swept away like feathers and the road washed out in several places. There was a big landslide at the Fleischmanns railroad station and the Clovesville bridge was nearly



The Delaware & Ulster Railroad was forced to cut short its tourist excursion season this year when hundreds of feet of track, like this section in Kelly Corners, were washed out.

taken from its foundation. . . Prof. E. C. Pickering of Harvard, referring to the present nation wide discussion of the rainy season, unequaled since 1892 and 1893, according to the *Detroit Free Press*, says the popular idea that the excessive summer rainfall is due to the war in Europe is erroneous. "That theory," he says, "is nearly as old as the ages and it has been disproved many times. The war in Europe has nothing to do with the present abnormal rainfall, whatever the cause may be." The popular theory is that the artillery and gun fire of the great armies liberates great quantities of dust and gases which rise to the upper regions and induce precipitation of vapor clouds.

## Biggest Flood in 23 Years Does Great Damage — October 3, 1924

In Margaretville there was a torrent of water between the covered bridge and Main Street. Lower Main Street was a sea from the home of Lavern Woolheater to the Mosler gate. All the cellars in that part of town were filled. In the upper end of the village from the home of C. J. Akerly to a long distance up state road there was nothing but a vast expanse of water. . . At Arkville the lumber yard of James Martin suffered a big loss. A large quantity of logs and lumber were swept away. On the lower side of the state road in the flood section of Arkville the ground was entirely cut away and it will be an expensive job to fill it in. Cauliflower growers on the flat lands suffered considerably all through this section. The muddy water spoiled the crop wherever it touched it. This alone will run into several thousand dollars loss. But the worst damage was to

## PULLED UNDER EMORY BROOK

Morgan Olmstead and Dr. Chamberlain, while on their way from Highmount to Griffin Corners, were obliged to ford the Emory Brook this side of that place. The wagon was overturned and the occupants tossed into the flood, Morgan succeeded in climbing on the horse's back, but the wagon was pitched by the angry waters on top of horse and rider, knocking him into the stream again, which was the last seen of him. Dr. Chamberlain grasped the reins and was dragged by the horse to the shore in an unconscious condition and quite badly injured. At this writing the body of Olmstead had not been recovered.

— October 16, 1903

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the railroads. Both the D. & N. and U. & D. suffered heavily. The U. & D. had seventeen washouts, the worst in the history of the road. A big force of men, steam shovels and all the wrecking machinery at the command of the road has been hard at work since Tuesday to get trains running again. . . It would be difficult to estimate the monetary damage to the two roads. A railroad official said yesterday that it would run from \$25,000 to \$50,000.

## Thursday's Flood Makes All-Time High Water Mark — October 14, 1932

. . . The water was about a foot deep on the sidewalk in front of the Galli-Curci theatre. The Dugan feed store (current Granary building) was built a few inches above any known high water mark but not enough for this flood. There were several inches of water on the floor. At the height there was seven feet of water in the Edmund's garage, four feet in the Jenkins garage, all cellars on the south side of Main Street were filled, the *Catskill Mountain News* office was flooded so that the issue of the paper was held up. . . Margaretville was the mecca on Sunday of the three adjoining counties. Stories and pictures of the flood in metropolitan papers gave it a wide advertising and hundreds of cars with thousands of visitors came to witness the havoc of the waters. . . It is estimated that there was a rainfall of one foot in the twenty-four hours. An official measure at Delhi gave the rainfall as about six inches while one at Shandaken gave it as 12 inches. It would seem that Margaretville had more than either of these places and it is possible that the rainfall here might have been 15 to 18 inches.

## Heavy rains Make Floods General Across Delaware County: Roxbury has Highest Water Within Memory of Oldest Resident

— September 23, 1938

Climaxing ten days of intermittent rain, the heavy downpour of Tuesday and Wednesday put the East Branch of the Delaware River over its banks throughout this village Monday evening to within about eighteen inches of the high water mark of 1932. For several hours the flood waters raged across Bridge street tearing out the grounds about Jenkins' garage and Davidson's service station. The (cauliflower) auction block erected two years

ago by the G. L. F. was taken downstream about seven o'clock and battered to pieces against the fairground bridge. Roxbury and Halcottville report the highest water within the memory of residents. At Roxbury, residents were in darkness from seven-thirty due to a failure of the electric light. Three important bridges were washed away by the raging streams in the vicinity and an all night watch was placed at the dam on Kirk-side lake, which, for the first time in its history, gave cause for worry. Two of the bridges taken out were on the Vega-Denver road and the third was the Hardscrabble bridge. Flats near the river and village gardens were inundated as was Halcottville road near Halcottville pond. Reports were sent out that the Halcottville creamery would be unable to operate yesterday due to the high water. The family of Scott Sanford was moved from their home near Halcottville early Wednesday evening as the flood waters continued to rise.

## New River Flows Past New School Under New Bridge — August 11, 1939

In addition to the construction of the new central school on the lower end of Main street there is considerable other activity there. Margaretville has long talked about flood control in that section to lessen the water damage in the business area and along lower Main street. This control has been accomplished by allowing the school grading contractors to take thousands of loads of gravel from the river which has been widened to more than twice its natural channel in front of the new school. Similar conditions have been brought about at a place opposite the Merritt lumber yard and for some distance below. The river from the point where the Bull Run enters



Bob Wyer took this photo of a car upended in a crater in Clovesville after the 1950 flood. Photo courtesy Delaware County Historical Association

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to the Fairgrounds bridge is of great width. This widened channel should be able to carry away a large quantity of water. It will also save the H. B. (Kelly) flat which came near total destruction in September's flood. To keep the roaring waters of the East Branch where they belong in the section mentioned a steel bulkhead has been built from the Fairgrounds bridge to nearly the upper end of the Kelly flat. This bulkhead is a solid one. A pile driver has driven long railroad rails into the ground. To these have been bolted large pieces of sheet steel or boiler plate. It will last for generations. The entire operation has been under the guidance and direction of the Margaretville Village Board of Trustees.



This was Bridge Street as it appeared August 24, 1933, long before the Freshtown/CVS plaza was constructed. It was probably taken from the roof of the O'Connor (now Miller) pharmacy. In left corner is a former hotel that became Mattino's Meat Market and is now the site of the Bun & Cone restaurant. The storefront building at center is Archibald's Restaurant (it later housed Bill Murphy's shoe repair and Woolheaters eatery). To its right are the Buick sales and service garage originally built by Clarke Sanford, and in 1933 operated by Earl Jenkins. At far right is the Dan Todd (later Gar Gladstone) house. Road sloping upward to left is what is now Route 28, before it was rebuilt in 1952. The building whose roof shows at right foreground was destroyed by fire in the early 1970s. Behind it is the present "Granary" building, later the home of Dugan and Taber feed store, with a bowling alley upstairs. Photo courtesy Roger Davis; history provided by Al Weiss.

On March 18, 1936, this big gasoline tank (right) floated downstream from the Newcomb service station (later Smith's service station, now parking lot across from Freshtown) and lodged against the Fair Street bridge. It was pulled away with cables during the height of the flood by A. Soderlind's men, according to the *Catskill Mountain News*. Photo courtesy Joe Monteleone



Bridge Street (below) was once again a mess and the A&P parking lot torn up following the April 1987 flood. Photo courtesy Ellen Verni



## Send us your flood photos & stories!

HSM will embark on an effort to collect oral accounts of the Flood of 2011. If you would like to tell your story, contact us: 845-586-4973; [history@catskill.net](mailto:history@catskill.net).

We are also looking for photos, stories and memorabilia from any Middletown area flood over the past 200 years. Consider sharing them with us so that future generations can put *their* floods in context!

# Remembering the Flood of 1996

Until two months ago, this was considered The Big One.

Following major floods in March of 1986, and again in April 1987, when nine inches of rain fell in 24 hours, the region was slammed again in early 1996.

A classic Nor'easter dumped more than two feet of snow on the Catskills January 7 and 8, 1996. Two more storms, on January 10 and 12, added another two feet of snow across much of the region. Unseasonably warm air passed over New York January 18 and 19, raising temperatures into the 60s in some places. The heavy snowpack melted rapidly. And then the rains came, between three and five inches at various locations in the Catskills on January 19.

Rain and melted snow ran off the frozen ground to fill streams, which emptied into the East Branch, turning the river into a monster. This 100-year flood sent vehicles, trees and buildings bobbing down the river, which crested at 14.9 feet, more than a foot higher than the previous record crest during the Flood of 1950.

In the Margaretville area, it destroyed or damaged 50 houses and mobile homes, along with 40 businesses. Twelve businesses on Bridge Street were virtually wiped out. Margaretville Central School sustained \$300,000 in damage and was closed for a week. The Catholic Church, the Post Office and the American Legion Hall were also seriously damaged.

Ten people died in the Catskills. Dozens lost their homes. The lives of thousands more were disrupted for months. Across Delaware County, the State and Federal governments paid more than \$20 million in individual aid claims and in assistance to municipalities to repair shattered infrastructure.

To encourage the owners of seriously damaged homes to relocate beyond the reach of the next flood, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) established its Hazard Mitigation ("Buy-Out") Program. Under this program, FEMA, in cooperation with State and local governments, purchased damaged residential properties from willing owners. All structures were then razed, leaving the flood-prone properties vacant in perpetuity.

Delaware County applied to FEMA to conduct the Buy-Out Program to help affected residents move

out of harm's way. County-wide, 29 homeowners participated in the program. FEMA paid 75% of the pre-flood value of their properties (\$1,765,756). New York City provided the 25% local match (\$479,647), and agreed to hold title to the land, once all structures were demolished.

Twenty-one Buy-Out parcels encompassing six acres of land were located in the Village of Margaretville. It took several years for the sales to be finalized. The final demolition and site restoration work was completed by the County in October 2000. The land is currently managed through cooperative agreements between New York City and the Village of Margaretville and the Margaretville Central School District.

— From Flood Kiosk  
on Lower Main,  
across from MCS



The bridge over the Bull Run on lower Main Street, Margaretville, clogged with debris in 1996. Photo courtesy Robert Halpern

## Breaking Records

At the height of the flood on January 19, 1996, 27,100 cubic feet of water per second flowed past the USGS gauging station at the Fair Street Bridge. At that rate, it would have taken just 2.1 seconds to cover a football field, including end zones, to a depth of one foot! The previous record of 20,600 cubic feet per second (CFS) was set in the 1950 flood.

A new record of 33,400 CFS was set August 28, 2011, when the East Branch at Margaretville rose 12.9 feet in 9.5 hours, an incredible 16.3 inches per hour. Flood stage is 11 feet; the river peaked at 15.97 feet that day.



The Bun & Cone was demolished in the Flood of January 1996. It was rebuilt on an elevated concrete foundation and withstood the latest pounding from Irene.



This covered bridge (above) which for the past 76 years has spanned the Millbrook on Tuscarora Club property, actually began life in Dunraven, crossing the Plattekill. It was built by William Mead as a toll gate bridge in 1870, according to Ward Hermann's book *Spans of Time*. Replaced by a modern iron bridge, the covered bridge was left abandoned until it was purchased and moved by the Tuscarora Club to a new site near the Percy Haddow farm at the head of "Demis Hole." The bridge was shortened to 24' and a small set of steps were built at the south side for the convenience of club members. "Very soon thereafter, a rip-roaring freshet gave it a bad battering and almost tore it from its foundation. The local skeptics shook their heads and said the next flood would wash it down to the Delaware," wrote Hermann. However, the bridge was reset on a firm foundation, and, with the help of a few hefty blasts of dynamite, the stream opening was enlarged to what was deemed sufficient size to accommodate any future floods. It met its match in Irene, though, and the old covered bridge was indeed washed away.



Fleischmanns Village Park, built as the Mountain Athletic Club grounds by the Fleischmanns family and given to the Village of Fleischmanns in 1913, was covered with tons of gravel and rock when the Bush Kill covered it on August 28, 2011. It has been used as a staging ground for stream and road recovery operations, and will be out of commission until well into 2012.

Hundreds of photographs of Middletown area veterans that have hung in a treasured exhibit on the walls of Middletown American Legion Post #216 (right) were submerged or dampened in the flood. They are currently in freezers awaiting drying and scanning. The Legion hall on Main Street, pictured here during the storm on August 28, is being repaired.



## HISTORIC LOSSES

The old Kelly Corners Post Office on the corner of Denver-Vega Road and Route 30 was destroyed in the recent flood. It is shown (below) in an undated photograph from HSM's Lina Kelly collection, and as it looked soon after the flood in a photo provided by Barbara Small (above). The property's owner, Trudy Sheldon, and son Caleb, had to be plucked by helicopter from the deck of their house at right when it was surrounded by water.



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# The Last Word – Clarke Sanford

*Home-grown philosopher Clarke Sanford, writing his weekly column, Mountain Dew, in the Catskill Mountain News on April 2, 1948, took a long view of Mother Nature's curveballs . . .*

When I look up at the heights of Pakatakan I am lost in wonder as I endeavor to calculate how long it took the glaciers and the Delaware to carry away the dirt and rock from the lofty top down to the valley level of today. And how many centuries will the river take to cut down another ten feet. It swings back and forth across the valley in its restless endeavor.

The valley floor and sides are sand or rock covered with the decayed vegetation of millions of years. Man calls this dirt or soil. The river works to carry it all to the sea. It is helped in this endeavor by the plow of man, by the pull of gravity which tends to roll matter down the hillsides to the grasp of the current, by every chuck or other creature which digs a burrow, by a thousand forces we do not recognize, all combining to move our very foundations toward the sea. A pebble moved around and around by a current of water in a hole in solid rock will wear the rock away in a long period of time.

It is not a constant stream. Last week's flood measured, the engineers say, more than 50,000 cubic feet per second. Next summer will come a day when the river is at rest, when I can cross without wetting my feet, when the water be so quiet a tiny

trout fly will disturb the surface and scare the trout, when this roar of the flood is changed to a tiny trickle, when the river is not a thing of awe but a smiling, lovable companion, gracious in its hospitality, lavish with its trout, a never-ending joy.



## THE 44¢ POST

THE 44¢ POST is an exclusive feature for members who receive *The Bridge* via e-mail. Because your newsletter requires no postage or label, you get an "extra"!

## A THRILLING RESCUE!

Not the least of the thrills was the rescue of the Misses Archibald from their restaurant on Bridge Street. They had remained there to carry their belongings up stairs and before they knew it, it was impossible for them to get out. When the foundation at the rear of the building began to go their lives were despaired of and several plans were put into effect to rescue them. They were finally taken out by hastily rigged **breeches buoy** between the Mattino building (current site of Bun & Cone) and the second story of the restaurant. One of the girls fainted when solid ground was reached.

— October 14, 1932



## What is a Breeches Buoy?

From Wikipedia:

A breeches buoy is a crude rope-based rescue device used to extract people from wrecked vessels, or to transfer people from one location to another in situations of danger. The device resembles a round emergency personal flotation device with a leg harness attached.

## Greatest Sale in the History of Margaretville

ON ACCOUNT OF THE RECENT FLOOD, \$5,000 WORTH OF CANNED GOODS WILL BE SOLD AT SACRIFICE. GOODS ARE IN EXCELLENT CONDITION AND GUARANTEED.

### Labels Wet Only

CORN, PEAS, SUCCOTASH, BEANS, CATSUP, PINEAPPLE, PEACHES, TOMATOES, PEARS, ETC

These Prices are Below Wholesale Price.

YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO MISS THIS SALE! DOORS OPENED AT 7 O'CLOCK A.M. SAT. NOV. 20, 1926 CONTINUING TO THE FOLLOWING SAT., NOV. 27, 1926

## Schriers Busy Corner Margaretville