

# Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Research

## Pennsylvania Public Libraries and the Great Flood of 1936

*Dark Clouds and Silver Linings*

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The Great Flood of 1936 damaged thousands of buildings, ruined millions of dollars' worth of infrastructure and personal property, and left thousands of citizens homeless in Pennsylvania. Among affected institutions were 14 public libraries that lost books and records and/or sustained structural damage during the flood. This article recounts the experiences of the four libraries with the largest claims: the Cambria Library (Johnstown), the Annie Halenbake Ross Library (Lock Haven), Milton Public Library, and the James V. Brown Library (Williamsport). Lessons learned, unexpected opportunities to reshape collections and services, and advancement of professional knowledge about conservation of water-soaked materials are discussed. In addition, the article provides details about the Pennsylvania Library Association's successful pursuit of state rehabilitation funds for affected libraries. Although the Great Flood of 1936 was an experience that no one would wish to repeat, it represents some silver linings in terms of public library history.

### Introduction

Just before midnight on St. Patrick's Day 1936, neighbors telephoned Mary E. Crocker with warnings that the Susquehanna River was flowing up Main Street. She grasped precious volumes of the *Lock Haven Express* from the basement and began to haul them upstairs. Soon, however, water began to pour through ground-level windows. Giving up on the newspapers, Crocker turned her attention to the reference collection and began to pile dictionaries and encyclopedias from lower shelves on top of nearby tables. Eyeing the water that inched onto the library's porch, she retreated to the second floor. The river crept up the stairs after her. Carrying files, food, and candles to her apartment on the third floor, she settled in for the night. As long as electricity lasted, she baked biscuits and wrote

letters to friends. When the power failed, she lit kindling in a fireplace and waited for morning. In just a few hours, floodwaters destroyed much of her library's book and periodical collection ("Library suffered heavy damage," 1936).

Many people cite the Dust Bowl as the worst environmental catastrophe of the 1930s. Yet the Great Flood of 1936, sometimes called the "St. Patrick's Day Flood," affected 11 states and was one of the decade's worst disasters in the Northeast (Madarasz, 2006). In Pennsylvania, an average of five extra inches of snow fell in December 1935, plus nearly nine extra inches in January 1936. Temperatures remained lower than normal throughout February, enabling ice and snow to accumulate. Then, on March 11-12, between one and four inches of rain fell on much of the state. A second storm on March 16-19 dumped from one to seven additional inches of rain, which, amplified by melting snow, produced some of the largest floods ever known along the Allegheny, Monongahela, Ohio, Susquehanna, and other rivers near the Appalachian Divide. Water covered approximately 1/15 of the state's land area—more than 3,000 square miles. Millions of dollars in repairs were needed for Pennsylvania's institutions, utilities, bridges, roads, rails, and mines (Garrett, 1937, pp. 19-22, 27; Mangan, 1936, pp. 14-20, 119; Shank, 1972, p. 35; Shannon, 1936).

The Annie Halenbake Ross Library in Lock Haven was among several libraries damaged. As this article will show, filthy water destroyed collections that had taken decades to build. It ruined handsome furnishings and compromised building infrastructure. Although the library profession had developed methods for cleaning the occasional book, there was little guidance for assessing and repairing hundreds of volumes during an emergency. Nonetheless, some librarians and community members responded creatively. Fresh books, refurbished equipment, and new departments replaced decades-old collections, décor, and services. Pennsylvania's experience in salvaging flooded materials informed at least one major library from another state. Library advocates successfully lobbied the Pennsylvania General Assembly for reclamation funds, thus establishing a precedent for state support. Thus there were several silver linings within the storm clouds.

## Method

To date, I have not found a comprehensive list of all Pennsylvania libraries damaged by the 1936 flood. Searching the *NewspaperARCHIVE* and *Newspapers.com* databases, which contain a substantial number of local newspapers, I found articles pertaining to some locations mentioned in this study. Unfortunately, neither database provides complete coverage of all Pennsylvania communities during the 1930s. An initial report in *Pennsylvania Library and Museum Notes* ("Flooded libraries," 1936) mentioned only eight locations: Harrisburg, Huntingdon, Johnstown, Kingston, Lock Haven, Milton, Pittsburgh, and Williamsport. Others soon came out of the woodwork. As I will discuss later, 17 institutions—the State Library of Pennsylvania (SLP), Pennsylvania State College, a high school library in Kingston, and 14 public libraries—applied for reclamation funds from the State of Pennsylvania. Although some may cite 17 as a definitive number, there could be other institutions that experienced flood damage but did not seek state assistance.

I was unable to visit every location, so I chose to investigate two large and two small public libraries. Several of the communities flooded in 1936 were inundated again by Hurricane Agnes in 1972. Thus the availability of documentation was a primary concern in selecting research sites. In July 2012, I had undertaken a survey of all public libraries in Pennsylvania founded before 1945. My questionnaire asked whether institutions had maintained annual reports, board of trustees meeting minutes, news clippings/scrapbooks, and other records from the 1860s to 1940s. I reused that data to recruit sites for the current project and confirmed which libraries were still able and willing to accommodate historical researchers. Thus this paper focuses on the Cambria Library in Johnstown (now the headquarters of the Cambria County Library System); the Annie Halenbake Ross Library in Lock Haven (Clinton County); the Milton Public Library (Northumberland County); and the James V. Brown Library in Williamsport (Lycoming County). As it turned out, these institutions also sustained the greatest damage during the 1936 flood.

In addition to investigating specific libraries, I also sought to understand the flood from a statewide perspective. To learn about the Pennsylvania Library Association's (PaLA) response, I used Executive Board correspondence and meeting minutes, records of the Legislative Committee, records of the Flood Relief Committee, and other materials dating from 1935 to 1939 in the PaLA Archives. Regarding state government, I hand-searched annual reports of SLP and issues of its periodical, *Pennsylvania Library and Museum Notes*. I consulted the biennial reports of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction; the *Journal of Meetings* and *Annual Reports* of the State Council of Education; the George Howard Earle Papers (MG 342) and the Records of the Department of Education (RG 22) at the Pennsylvania State Archives (neither of which proved helpful and thus are not cited in the reference list); the *Pennsylvania Legislative Journal*; and other legal materials. Seeking additional resources, I searched Cannon's *Bibliography of Library Economy, Library Literature* index for 1920-1939, and numerous library catalogs, including *WorldCat*.

What immediately follows are descriptions of four libraries' flood experiences. For the sake of comparison, the two larger libraries (Johnstown and Williamsport) are grouped together, as are the two smaller libraries (Lock Haven and Milton).

## Flooding at Large Libraries: Johnstown and Williamsport

Among the various communities that sought state funds for library damage, Pittsburgh and Harrisburg were the largest in terms of population (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1932, pp. 669, 672). In both cases, however, branch libraries or deposit stations rather than headquarters were affected. Perhaps for that reason, reports of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh and the Harrisburg Public Library/Dauphin County Library System provided relatively little information.

With a population of approximately 67,000 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1932, p. 670), Johnstown in Cambria County was the next largest library community known to have been affected. Located at the meeting of the Little Conemaugh and Stony Creek Rivers, Johnstown had flooded many times prior to 1936. In addition to the "Great Johnstown Flood" of 1889, there were major inundations in 1904, 1906, 1907, and 1920. Like other areas flooded in 1936, significant amounts of snow had built up around Johnstown during the preceding winter, followed by several days of rain in mid-March. By lunchtime on March 18, basements in downtown buildings were flooded and city sewers were backing up. Ultimately, 9,000 residents were left homeless, and thousands of buildings were damaged (Burkert, 2000, pp. 20-21; Federal Writers' Project, 1939a, pp. 23-29; Whittle, 2005, pp. 232-246).

Johnstown's Cambria Library was located on Washington Street, facing the Little Conemaugh River. Founded in 1870, it had enjoyed generous support from the Cambria Iron Works/Cambria Steel Company and its successors until Bethlehem Steel severed the relationship in the late 1920s. Because of its longstanding financial ties to local industry, the Cambria Library offered extensive coursework in electricity, mechanical and structural drawing, and other practical sciences. It also had a substantial collection of technical books and journals. This said, Bethlehem Steel's disinvestment came as a great shock. The City of Johnstown gave its first appropriation of \$5,400 in 1932, an amount that was roughly a quarter of what the library had received in better days (Cambria Library Association Board of Trustees, June 5, 1933). Thus there were about 28,000 volumes in the library, but few were new.

Fortunately for the collection, the first floor consisted mainly of lobbies and an auditorium. In other words, most books and periodicals were housed on upper stories (Berkey, 1937). Nonetheless, a substantial number of borrowed items in the possession of flood victims were damaged. Ultimately, Cambria Library sent 1,160 volumes for rebinding at a cost of more than \$800 (Cambria Library Association Board of Trustees, November 23, 1937). On account of the flood, Johnstown's library was entirely closed from March 17 through April 13 (Cambria Library Association Board of Trustees, November 23, 1937). Without federally funded labor, it is difficult to imagine how it

could have reopened as quickly as it did. From March 29 through May 6, Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers cleaned the library's cellar, lobbies, stairways, and auditorium. Later in the year, WPA workers and teenagers from the National Youth Administration (NYA) mended more than 3,000 volumes (Cambria Library Association Board of Trustees, November 23, 1937).

As it turned out, the 1936 flood gave the Cambria Library impetus to fulfill a longstanding need in Johnstown. At one point, there was more than seven feet of murky water in its auditorium. Upholstered seating was thus rendered unsalvageable. As rentals had provided scant revenue, the Board of Trustees voted to convert the auditorium to a children's department. A committee of local women planned furnishings, decorations, and book purchases (Cambria Library Association Board of Trustees, July 20, 1937). The renovated space opened on December 3, 1937, and included new lighting, low shelving, and more than 3,000 volumes for juveniles. Thus librarian Helen Berkey finally realized a dream she had held for more than three decades (Cambria Library Association Board of Trustees, November 23, 1937, and June 7, 1938; "New children's library," 1937).

Compared to the Cambria Library, the James V. Brown Library (JVB) in Williamsport, Lycoming County, served a smaller population—approximately 45,000 people in 1930 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1932, p. 691). Also, it was situated several blocks north of the Susquehanna River. Yet of all libraries known to have suffered damage from the 1936 flood, JVB suffered the greatest loss. As the following discussion will show, this can be attributed to the library's unfortunate storage of materials on lower levels in its building.

The Lycoming County Historical Society's O. R. Howard Thomson Manuscripts Collection includes friendly letters between librarian Thomson and Helen Vogel White, the secretary of his close friend, Henry F. Marx of Easton Area Public Library. This correspondence complements official accounts by revealing an administrator's gut reaction to the flood and its aftermath. For example, the difficulty of anticipating the emergency became apparent. On March 13, Thomson wrote to Vogel that several days of rain had caused the Susquehanna River to "rampage," but he had used nearly 30 volunteers to lug 7,000 items from the cellar to the first floor. Furthermore, Thomson felt confident that JVB was "built sufficiently high to be out of reach."

Little did he know that rain would resume a few days later. When floodwaters rose again on March 18, staff and volunteers carried as many books as possible up to the second floor. Unfortunately, the main reading room's octagonal design and skylight resulted in diminished capacity to store materials. At the flood's crest, two-thirds of Williamsport was flooded and 22 inches of mud and water stood on the library's main floor (Federal Writers' Project, 1939b, p. 151).

Early news reports placed emphasis on damage to the building, which included ruined wooden flooring within JVB's Pennsylvania Room and 21 doors throughout the library that were "splintered beyond repair" ("Brown library not to reopen,"



Figure 1

*View of the back of James V. Brown Library during the 1936 flood. From C. Waters, 1936, Flood: West Branch Valley's Answer to Disaster.*

April 11, 1936; “Library loss heavy,” March 29, 1936). Yet according to a copy of JVB’s initial claim for state funding, the largest losses were in the collection, not the building. It requested more than \$20,300 for “binding and fumigating books” and more than \$11,700 for “books” (appended to McCormick, 1936). Since Thomson’s correspondence with Vogel is sparse over the next few weeks, he may have been in crisis mode. Such interpretation is reinforced by the half-sentences he wrote to her on April 11:

Well we’re up for breath anyhow. Fifteen thousand volumes water soaked ... Frantic appeals to Washington, Harrisburg, and other places for duplicates of documents and Pennsylvaniana. Years of correspondence ... destroyed beyond salvage; records being ironed and the staff attired in overalls, knickers, pants. The Librarian in hip-boots and leather jacket as he had to wade around in the cellar. No heat for a week so whiskey administered to everybody twice a day and anti-typhoid injections made once a week. Bills being contracted for up to \$25,000 and not a cent in sight! Great time.

One factor that set JVB apart from the three other institutions in this study was that Williamsport voters had approved a tax levy that had been providing significant annual support to the library since the 1920s. Also, the building’s donor, James Vanduzee Brown, had bequeathed an endowment. While such resources seemed inadequate to provide the services Thomson had desired, they likely emboldened him to act more innovatively and quickly. Wanting to save as many items as possible before mildew set in, as well as to clear the building for cleaning and repair, Thomson sent thousands of volumes to the Universal Publishing Syndicate (UPS), a commercial bookbinder in Philadelphia, rather than task his staff with assessing and repairing individual books at the flood site. Sopping-wet materials were packed into trucks without any prior cleaning, sorting, or record-keeping (Thomson, ca. 1907-ca. 1943, Thomson to C. Milam, January 29, 1937). Later, he sent three staff members to Philadelphia to examine each title coming from UPS’s drying ovens and decide which ones were worth rebinding versus those that could be discarded and/or replaced. The librarians then contacted colleagues at other institutions to request donations (claim appended to McCormick, 1936). JVB reopened to the public on April 30, 1936 (James V. Brown Library, 1907-1946a, *Annual Report*, 1936).

Comparing the experiences of these two large libraries, one finds that Cambria Library’s decision to store most of its collections on upper stories resulted in far fewer book losses than at the James V. Brown Library. Nonetheless, JVB’s rapid response enabled it to salvage approximately 50% of its waterlogged items—a larger portion than any other flooded library in Pennsylvania (Thomson, ca. 1907-ca. 1943, Thomson to F. Price, March 12, 1937). As will be discussed later, Thomson’s notion of prioritizing the stabilization of materials is much the same today.

## Flooding at Small Libraries: Lock Haven and Milton

Among public libraries in small communities, the Annie Halenbake Ross Library of Lock Haven and the Milton Public Library presented the largest reclamation claims to state officials. Fortunately, both institutions have maintained substantial records of their flood experiences.

According to the U.S. Census, Lock Haven was home to about 9,700 residents in 1930 (p. 695). Nestled in a valley near the meeting of Bald Eagle Creek and the western branch of the Susquehanna River, it had flooded many times. The 1936 flood was the worst on record up to that point, with the river rising 11 feet above flood stage (Brubaker, 2002, p. 201). Like many small-town public libraries in Pennsylvania, the Annie Halenbake Ross Library (AHRL) opened in a building that had once been a residence. Though small, it was quite busy for its size. Head librarian Mary E. Crocker, who had worked with O. R. Howard Thomson before moving to Lock Haven in 1919, was

ambitious. By the late 1920s, her library was distributing books to schools in Avis, Flemington, Loganton, Renovo, and other communities in Clinton County (Annie Halenbake Ross Library, 1927).

Located on Main Street just a block away from the Susquehanna River, AHRL was very vulnerable to flooding. As described at the beginning of this article, Crocker attempted to rescue newspapers and books in lower stories until she was stranded on the third floor. Like the James V. Brown Library in Williamsport, AHRL lost more than 7,000 books primarily because it stored a substantial portion of them on lower levels. In addition, 15,000 magazines, nearly the entire periodical collection, were unrecoverable. Fences, shrubbery, and trees were damaged or washed away, too. Crocker estimated AHRL's loss at well over \$20,000 ("Benefits of 1936 flood," 1938; "Library suffered heavy flood damage," 1936).

Since AHRL had a small budget, no flood insurance, and no emergency funds, staff labored day and night with local help to repair the building and its contents. One article reported that "men were called in from the street to shovel mud," while workers from the WPA scrubbed, disinfected, and oiled furniture ("Library suffered heavy flood damage," 1936). Faculty and administrators of Lock Haven State College sent new editions of classic books ("Library expecting \$13,000 payment," 1936; "Many gifts of books," 1936). Although AHRL staff selected approximately 2,000 volumes to be sent to Universal Publishing Syndicate, librarians retained about 5,000 volumes for drying locally. WPA workers laid the books out on the library's lawn for fresh air and sunlight.

Unfortunately, however, these grassroots efforts were ineffective. Intermittent rain doused books on the library lawn and constant dampness caused mildew to set in. Ultimately, most of those volumes were lost ("Library suffered heavy flood damage," 1936). More tragically, the library's premature reopening in June, before everything was completely dry, caused mildew to spread to other materials. Thus AHRL had to remove even more items from its shelves. In hindsight, Crocker wished she had sent more books for immediate professional care (Thomson, ca. 1907-ca. 1943, copy of undated letter from M. E. Crocker to F. Price). Frugality, understandably born of living in a small community during the Great Depression, cost Lock Haven a large portion of its collection.

Renovating on the cheap caused other problems. Crocker's intention was to reopen in mid-May, but efforts were stalled when she slipped in the mud, dislocated her shoulder, fractured her arm, and spent several days in the hospital ("Public library plans reopening," 1936). Some services remained suspended for many months as the small staff focused on reclamation. For example, in November 1936 the library did not mount its customary exhibit for Children's Book Week, a nationwide event in which it had participated annually since 1919 ("Children's book exhibit," 1936; "Mrs. Brosius speaks," 1937). Lack of resources also translated into repairs that were done gradually, only as funds became available. This meant additional closures to the public. For example, after AHRL received a check from the state, it closed again from December 24, 1936, through approximately January 30, 1937. It then reopened part-time—2:00-7:00 p.m. on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays—so staff could process incoming books ("Reopen Ross Library Monday," 1937).

This said, there were certain positive outcomes of the 1936 flood. Like the Cambria Library in Johnstown, AHRL used its opportunity to renovate and reallocate space. During the winter of 1936-1937, construction workers shored up the building's foundation, leveled floors, laid new linoleum, and restored woodwork. They also replaced the worn, blue burlap that had covered the walls with light paint and buff paper ("Library reopens," 1937; "Newly-renovated adult library," 1937). Remaining magazines, newspapers, and the local history collection were moved to previously unused space in upper stories for safekeeping. Meanwhile, staff converted rooms on the first floor to a children's department and a cozy reading/sitting room. WPA workmen cut an exterior door to the youngsters' area so that they could enter without disturbing other patrons ("Benefits of 1936 Flood," 1938; "Children's book exhibit," 1936; "Library expecting \$13,000 payment," 1936). Thus, as a result of the flood, AHRL became more attractive and functional.

Another small library challenged by the 1936 flood was the Milton Public Library (MPL) in Northumberland County, which served approximately 8,600 people (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1932, p. 696). A project of the Women's Club of Milton, the library's first home had been in a rented office and barroom of the Broadway House. In 1932, it moved to the former Milton National Bank. Receiving no appropriations from local government, it charged rental fees to those who wished to borrow fiction. It otherwise subsisted on annual fundraising drives until a local "Community Chest" (a forerunner of the United Way) was formed and the library became a "participating agency" ("Milton Public Library provides," 1967).

Residents living at mid-century recalled 1936 as the "Granddaddy" of all floods. Snow had begun to fall in November and by Christmas the ground was frozen hard. At the end of February, icy precipitation was several feet deep. Flooding began with rains on March 12 and crested around noon on March 18 ("Milton hit hard," 1967). Located on South Front Street, MPL was very near the Susquehanna's edge. According to one early report, water damaged 85% of its collection ("Flooded libraries," 1936).

Although I found no human interest stories comparable to the Lock Haven librarian who baked biscuits as filthy water rose around her, MPL librarian Louise Hassenplug's annual and monthly reports provided excellent documentation of a small institution's long recovery process. For Milton, it began in March 1936 and continued for more than two years. Hassenplug began her account as follows:

Books were, literally, shoveled out and voluntary help was given to clean our building from flood dirt. The C.C.C. boys gave generously of their time as well as P.W.A. [sic] workers.... The actual number of volumes on shelves at present date cannot be known until an inventory has been taken and the flood loss given an actual count. This probably cannot be done until fall. The registration books and register's cards were destroyed[,] which means that a new file of borrowers must be started (Hassenplug, 1935-1939b, monthly report for March 1936).

Although the library reopened during the first week of April, staff found that books and materials "continued to deteriorate" and that they were "continually discarding" them. Thus MPL decided to send more than 3,000 books to Universal Publishing Syndicate. Anticipating state assistance, Hassenplug spent much of April compiling a "claim of losses" (Hassenplug, 1935-1939b, monthly report for March 1936; Milton Public Library Board of Trustees, April 6, 1936). The following month, UPS returned hundreds of volumes and MPL staff closed the library in order to process them (Hassenplug, 1935-1939b, monthly report for May 1936). They also wrote to more than 30 publishers to obtain replacement copies ("Library will reopen doors," 1936).

MPL reopened, albeit part-time, on June 13, 1936. Employees continued to work on recovery efforts in the morning while the library was closed, then served the public from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. and 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. ("Library will reopen doors," 1936). Though books returned in "excellent condition," there were still more than 3,000 of MPL's materials in UPS's possession in the middle of June. Hassenplug's annual report for 1936, written in the winter of 1936-1937, showed that the library had only just begun to reconcile its inventory at that point. She noted, "Only 41 books of the flood loss have been discarded—this loss will be completed in 1937." Another year went by and only shelf-checks of MPL's juvenile books and adult nonfiction had been completed. It was not until the end of 1938 that all volumes had been accounted for (Hassenplug, 1935-1939a, annual report for 1938).

MPL's records also documented lobbying efforts of library trustees and local government officials who helped secure passage of a bill to provide state assistance for flooded libraries. In Milton, Chief Burgess Enos T. Kerr and members of Borough Council wrote to Governor George H. Earle requesting that he sign legislation. Milton School Superintendent Carl L. Millward and County Superintendent C. E. Hilbish also contacted Lester K. Ade, the Superintendent of Pennsylvania's Department of Public Instruction ("Library will reopen doors," 1936). Board members Rebe S. Miles, Laura K. Paul, and Celeste Bailey traveled to Harrisburg at least twice to support the bill's

passage and implementation (Milton Public Library Board of Trustees, July 6 and August 14, 1936). Thus, Milton's experience informs us, as do the paragraphs that follow, that librarians were not the only key players in reclamation efforts.

## Advances in Library Disaster Practices

Although individual libraries' experiences are fascinating in and of themselves, the 1936 flood added to professional knowledge about library disaster response. Up until that point, the most widespread preservation concern had been the ubiquitous deterioration of cheaply manufactured books. Among uncommon events, librarians had come to fear fires more than floods, as water-related disasters occurred rarely, if ever (Higginbotham, 1990, p. 37). Advice manuals of the era, including Margaret Brown and Gertrude Stiles' *Mending and Repair of Books* (1921), the ALA Committee on Bookbinding's *Care and Binding of Books and Magazines* (1928), Zana Miller's *Better Methods of Materials in Book-Mending* (1931), and Arthur Kimberly and J. F. G. Hicks's *A Survey of Storage Conditions in Libraries* (1931), did not address flood prevention or water damage. The most relevant resource was a 1932 article written by Dee W. Minier of Los Angeles Public Library, which advocated circulating heated air to remove moisture and prevent mildew in humid (not flooded) storage spaces. Others, such as Robert D. MacLeod's extensive 1909 guide in *Library World*, offered chemical solutions for removing dirt and stains from a single volume at a time. Thus librarians in Pennsylvania had little if any help in coping with large numbers of soaked materials.

When the 1936 flood occurred, the Universal Publishing Syndicate was not an expert in water-damaged books. However, the Philadelphia-based bookbinder soon became one. As its president Charles W. Carroll remembered, "The Library of Congress, Government Printing Shop and expert book restorers were all appealed to but not one soul had experienced the salvaging, mending, drying & repairing of wet books." So UPS rented a vacant building to temporarily store thousands of volumes while its executives "round[ed] up scientists, expert paper makers, chemists and Doctors" to explore mildew. UPS quickly learned that "the deadly spore" could return with a vengeance if books were merely air-dried. "Extreme heat," however, seemed to kill it. The company



Figure 2  
*Books from the James V. Brown Library at the Electrical Services Supply Company, Philadelphia, before being placed in ESSC's drying oven. Undated newspaper clipping from James V. Brown Library scrapbook, ca. April 1936.*

identified commercial ovens within the Electric Service Supply Company (ESSC) of Philadelphia that were large enough to bake thousands of volumes at a time. After experts figured out the maximum heat tolerated by each type of paper, flood items were grouped by paper type and placed on lateral trays in the ovens, which were set up to 250 degrees Fahrenheit. Fans blew away evaporating moisture. Engineers estimated that a single truck of the James V. Brown Library's books released more than four tons of fluid ("Brown library not to reopen," April 11, 1936; Pennsylvania Library Association Flood Relief Committee, 1936, undated press release written by C. W. Carroll).



Company executives and scientists kept records of their experiments, collected testimonials about the outcome of treatments, and shared this information with those who asked (Thomson, ca. 1907-1943, C. W. Carroll to Mr. Diggs of the Works Progress Administration, January 28, 1937).



**Figure 3**  
*Ann Sliwecka, probably an employee of Universal Publishing Syndicate, pressing the pages of a damaged book. Undated newspaper clipping from James V. Brown Library scrapbook, ca. April 1936.*

Thomson's suggestions were to keep a separate account book for flood-related expenditures and to photograph the mess before cleaning it so as to have evidence to "use in fight for state appropriation." He also advocated placing books in commercial ovens as quickly as possible to destroy mildew and typhoid. Another tip was to focus on repairing "rarities" and out-of-print materials. Cheap paperbacks, on the other hand, should be replaced with new copies rather than rebound. Regarding building repairs, Thomson cautioned Brigham to remove all damp items first, as moisture would spread to dry materials. He advocated running fans day and night while keeping "the furnace hot and the windows open." Furthermore, he cautioned against repainting walls or laying new flooring until the following winter because cement, plaster, and wood often retained moisture (Thomson, ca. 1907-ca. 1943, Thomson to Brigham, February 8, 1937).

Judging from available documentation, it appears that Brigham implemented much of this advice. He established a "separate bookkeeping record of all flood expenditures" and also a "special minute book of all conferences, meetings, and decisions relating to flood rehabilitation work" (Louisville Free Public Library, 1937-1938, minutes of March 10, 1937). He rapidly sought a commercial oven of the size and type needed to salvage thousands of books. Finding none that were operational, he contracted with Charles Carroll to send 30,000 volumes to Universal Publishing Syndicate (Louisville Free Public Library, May 1937). Rebound in brown buckram, they included *DeBow's Review*, *Godey's Lady's Book*, the *U.S. Patent Office Gazette*, and other 19th-century periodicals that would have been impossible to repurchase ("Library books damaged," 1938). Brigham found Thomson's detailed instructions a "God send" (Thomson, ca. 1907-ca. 1943, Brigham to Thomson, undated telegram).

In addition to responding to colleagues' appeals, Thomson tried to correct what he perceived as misinformation in the professional literature. For example, after he read an article by John Archer in the *ALA Bulletin* on the "Treatment of Water-Soaked Books," he wrote to the journal's editor that Archer's method of hand-washing

In late January 1937, another record-breaking flood on the Ohio River caused a half-billion dollars in property damage through several Midwestern states (Welky, 2011). Carl Milam, the Executive Secretary of the American Library Association (ALA), contacted Ralph Munn of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh for advice. Munn referred Milam's letter to O. R. Howard Thomson in Williamsport, who sent a two-page reply (Thomson, ca. 1907-ca. 1943, Thomson to Milam, January 29, 1937). At about the same time, Harold F. Brigham, head of the Louisville Free Public Library (LFPL), telegraphed Thomson asking for "essential dos and don'ts." Brigham had a catastrophe of epic proportions on his hands, as the Central Library and nine of ten of its branches sustained damage during Louisville's flood. In his main library, nearly 25,000 volumes in a basement stack were soaked. System-wide, he estimated cleanup and repair costs at more than \$200,000 (Louisville Public Library, May 1937). Among

and air-drying books was utterly impractical for large-scale disasters. No library had enough space or electric fans to lay out thousands of volumes. His letter to the *ALA Bulletin* was published in May 1937. In the years immediately following, the 1936 flood did not generate many other articles about water-damaged libraries. Notably, Thomson's insights were excluded from a 1945 manual authored by Harry Miller Lydenberg and John Archer (the same person Thomson had publicly criticized). Still, aspects of Thomson's and Carroll's methods have become part of today's practice. Now we employ freezing rather than heating to gain time for conservators to make assessments and develop treatment plans. Yet the notion of acting quickly to stabilize materials remains key, as does contracting or partnering with agencies that offer industrial-scale equipment (Balloffet & Hille, 2005, pp. 16-19; Forde, 2007, pp. 133-136; Kahn, 2003, pp. 65-76; Matthews & Feather, 2003, pp. 102-106; Swan, Buchanan, Iacone, & Priore, 1993, pp. 21-29).

## State Reclamation Funding

Few if any of the libraries affected by the 1936 flood were able to absorb the costs of drying, fumigating, rebinding, and replacing large portions of their collections. Fortunately, they had an important ally in industry. Together, they organized a task force that successfully obtained state assistance.

Available records do not clarify who originated the idea but a best guess is that it developed through conversations between James V. Brown Library Director O. R. Howard Thomson and Universal Publishing Syndicate President Charles W. Carroll. According to Thomson, he "enlisted" Carroll soon after the flood (Thomson, ca. 1907-1943, Thomson to C. H. Milam, January 29, 1937). For his part, Carroll was serving as chair of the Mayor of Philadelphia's Flood Relief Committee and in that capacity was touring several communities along the Susquehanna River. Carroll later stated that his company had "jumped into the Pennsylvania situation because it is our home State and we were serving a large number of these stricken libraries." In other words, "[I]t was on the basis of service to our customers of years standing, which motivated our interest" (Thomson, ca. 1907-ca. 1943, Carroll to Dr. Diggs of the Works Progress Administration, January 28, 1937). Within a few weeks of the flood, Carroll wrote to Ralph Munn, chair of the PaLA's Legislative Committee, of his certainty that if they used "proper publicity and correct technique," flooded libraries could receive reimbursement from either federal or state sources (Pennsylvania Library Association Flood Relief Committee, 1936, Carroll to Munn, April 4, 1936).

Prompt action was needed because Governor George H. Earle had called an "extraordinary session" of the state legislature to convene in early May to consider flood relief and other urgent matters (Pennsylvania General Assembly, 1936a). By the end of April, Pennsylvania Library Association President Frances H. Kelly appointed an ad hoc "Flood Relief Committee" to obtain rehabilitation funds. The group consisted primarily of librarians at flooded institutions, including O. R. Howard Thomson of the James V. Brown Library; Mary E. Crocker of the Annie Halenbake Ross Library; Alice R. Eaton of the Harrisburg Public Library; Margaret Jackson of the Hoyt Library, Kingston; and Louise Hassenplug of Milton Public Library. Other members included State Librarian Joseph A. Rafter and A. Boyd Hamilton, a trustee of the Harrisburg Public Library, who was a leader within the Pennsylvania Senate (Pennsylvania Library Association Flood Relief Committee, 1936, F. H. Kelly to all committee members, April 29, 1936).

To coordinate the group, Kelly chose Charles Carroll. In addition to first-hand knowledge of recovering library materials, it appears that Carroll was politically savvy and well-connected. No later than April 4, 1936, he had already spoken to two state legislators. While one was fully supportive of providing rehabilitation funds to libraries, the other was "a bit skeptical" but might vote yes if libraries made "an honest effort to salvage their books" rather than just "throw[ing] their stuff out on the junk pile." Therefore Carroll advised librarians to generate, collect, and forward news stories to illustrate how many institutions (i.e., voting districts) the flood had affected and the refurbishment

efforts librarians made (Pennsylvania Library Association Flood Relief Committee, 1936, Carroll to R. Munn, April 4 and April 16, 1936). He also directed them to compile itemized lists of their losses, obtain at least two bids on repairs, and submit the information in "one folder so that it will be in presentable form" (Pennsylvania Library Association Flood Relief Committee, 1936, Carroll to F. H. Kelly, May 4, 1936). To assist them, State Librarian Rafter dispatched Evelyn Matthews, a veteran employee within SLP's Extension Department, to visit each library and help with compiling the appropriate documentation (Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction, 1936-1937, letter from Rafter to Lester K. Ade appended to journal entry of December 4, 1936). This said, when Bill 60 was first introduced on May 12, 1936, by Representative Joseph A. Simon of Lock Haven, it asked for \$150,000, which was substantially more than the libraries needed (An act making an appropriation, 1936). Figured in was probable "paring down" by the House Appropriation Committee (HAC) and Governor Earle (Pennsylvania Library Association Flood Relief Committee, 1936, Carroll to R. Munn, May 21, 1936; "Simon introduces bills," 1936).

Unfortunately, neither the *Pennsylvania Legislative Journal (PLJ)* nor the *Harrisburg Patriot* (widely if informally considered the paper of record for state government affairs) details any dramas that may have ensued during the consideration of Bill 60. Skimming the *PLJ* and the *Patriot* from mid-May through early July 1936, it appears that legislators were far more concerned with the WPA and other poverty/unemployment relief programs — much more expensive propositions with greater political and social ramifications than a mere six-figure appropriation to be shared between a dozen or so libraries. Nonetheless, the HAC reduced funding to \$125,000 before the bill came up for a vote and passed (189-0). Two weeks later, the senate reduced it again, to \$100,000, and the amended legislation passed the house (197-0). Governor George H. Earle signed Act 16 (previously known as Bill 60) into law on July 8, 1936 (Pennsylvania General Assembly, 1936a, 39; Pennsylvania General Assembly, 1936b, May 12, June 17, June 30, & July 8, 1936).

Thus flood-damaged libraries received about \$16,000 less than they actually wanted (Pennsylvania Library Association Flood Relief Committee, 1936, Carroll to F. H. Kelly, July 1, 1936). According to the legislation, they had to "file sworn proofs of loss," which were to be reviewed by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). DPI would then make recommendations to the State Council of Education, which would set the dollar amount that each library would receive. In fact, however, Carroll and the libraries colluded before and after the law's passage to ensure desirable processing of their claims. As previously mentioned, each library worked with SLP staff to compile documentation before the legislation was finalized. After \$100,000 in state funds were approved, Carroll wisely counseled libraries to meet ahead of time to plan how they would trim each institution's request. He himself believed that Pittsburgh and other large libraries could afford more cuts and hoped that they would "scale down their losses voluntarily" (Pennsylvania Library Association Flood Relief Committee, Carroll to F. H. Kelly, July 15, 1936). However, the libraries themselves decided upon a "pro-rata" distribution, whereby each would receive about 95% of the amount they had originally requested (Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction, 1936-1937, letter from Rafter to Lester K. Ade appended to journal entry of February 5, 1937). Carroll also advised each library to send at least one "library representative" and "one or two trustees" to their meetings with Superintendent Lester K. Ade, as "a good sized body will greatly impress the State officials who have charge of the work of allocating the claims" (Pennsylvania Library Association Flood Relief Committee, 1936, Carroll to all committee members, August 21, 1936). Perhaps this tactic worked, since Ade and the State Council of Education approved the claims largely as State Librarian Rafter presented them, even though the final total was a few thousand dollars over-budget.

Although today's librarians probably do not consider 1936 as a watershed year in the history of public funding, Carroll viewed it as a historical moment. While a 1931 law had appropriated a budget to the State Library to reallocate to *county* library systems, there was no authorization for the state to provide funding *directly* to *municipal* libraries. Thus he hoped he had finally "broken down a precedent of many years standing" and that sometime in the not-too-distant future, Pennsylvania would provide annual support to public libraries (Pennsylvania Library Association Flood Relief Committee, 1936, Carroll to F. H. Kelly, July 15, 1936). He was right in expecting the task to

require “the patience of Job,” though. State funding for public library operating costs did not come to fruition until the 1960s.

Table 1

*Distribution of State Aid to Flooded Libraries Approved by State Council of Education*

<b>Library (Location)</b>	<b>Amount</b>
<b>James V. Brown Library (Williamsport, Lycoming County)</b>	\$38,648.52
<b>Annie Halenbake Ross Library (Lock Haven, Clinton County)</b>	\$22,299.10
<b>Milton Public Library (Milton, Northumberland County)</b>	\$12,400.58
<b>Cambria Library (Johnstown, Cambria County)</b>	\$10,132.65
<b>Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (Pittsburgh, Allegheny County)</b>	\$9,883.09
<b>Hoyt Library (Kingston, Luzerne County)</b>	\$4,662.53
<b>Harrisburg Public Library (Harrisburg, Dauphin County)</b>	\$1,550.98
<b>Pennsylvania State College (State College, Centre County)</b>	\$1,209.97
<b>Kittanning Public Library (Kittanning, Armstrong County)</b>	\$534.89
<b>Memorial Public Library (Alexandria, Huntingdon County)</b>	\$342.56
<b>Osterhout Free Library (Wilkes-Barre, Luzerne County)</b>	\$302.71
<b>Kingston High School (Kingston, Luzerne County)</b>	\$286.17
<b>Huntingdon County Library (Huntingdon, Huntingdon County)</b>	\$238.75
<b>Sunbury Public Library (Sunbury, Northumberland County)</b>	\$105.95
<b>State Library of Pennsylvania</b>	\$101.62
<b>Tarentum Public Library (Tarentum, Allegheny County)</b>	\$26.45
<b>Sewickley Public Library (Sewickley, Allegheny County)</b>	\$22.37

*Note.* Adapted from Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction, 1936-1937, letter from Rafter to Lester K. Ade appended to journal entry of February 5, 1937.

## Conclusion

Although the 1936 flood occurred nearly 80 years ago, some of its lessons remain relevant today. It appears that central libraries in large, flooded cities like Johnstown and Williamsport suffered the greatest losses. Yet in smaller communities like Lock Haven and Milton, the task of cleanup was more daunting and drawn-out because of limited means. As the relative losses of Cambria Library and James V. Brown Library suggest, institutions in flood-vulnerable areas should not store valuable materials in basements or on ground floors. By housing most of its collection on upper stories, Cambria Library minimized damage to its collection. In contrast, using its basement as a stack space left JVB's collection very vulnerable. Another trenchant lesson learned through the 1936 flood is the necessity of postponing time-consuming decisions about binding and replacement until after items have been stabilized. Because it acted quickly to dry its materials, JVB suffered a lower percentage of loss than other institutions. Conversely, the Annie Halenbake Ross Library, which tried for weeks to air-dry and hand-clean waterlogged items, had to discard larger portions of its collection. Perhaps more importantly, libraries can sometimes use emergencies as prompts to review priorities and thus create better environments and services. For example, rather than restoring spaces to their previous functions, both the Cambria Library and the Annie Halenbake Ross Library converted underutilized spaces into children's areas. Lastly, the collaborations between O. R. Howard Thomson and Charles Carroll in cleaning materials; between the Cambria Library and the Women's Library Association of Johnstown in designing a children's room; and between the Milton Public Library and borough/county officials in lobbying for the passage of Bill 60/Act 16, show us that libraries benefit greatly from calling upon friends in the community, industry, and government.

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