

The Flood of 1987
by
Roger Merchant
(Draft: April 22, 2020)



Ice Jam at the Old Abbot Bridge:

Events leading up to the flood included significant snowfall accumulation over-winter (30"+) including wet snows across the upper Piscataquis watershed weeks prior to the flood. The snowfall held an equivalent of 6 inches of rain. Over mid-March when wet snow was falling at high elevations (1000'+), it was raining at lower elevations like Dover-Foxcroft (354 feet). By late March the freezing and thawing of spring breakup, resulted in ice jamming the Piscataquis River above Abbot Bridge. The elements were in place for major flooding throughout the Piscataquis watershed. All that was needed was warming weather and rain.



The Deluge:

Over March 30, an intense storm cell with heavy rain and warming temperatures dumped 7 inches of rainfall into the upper watershed. All the winter and wet spring snows and rainfall came flowing down river from the Piscataquis Mountains and into the communities of the lower Piscataquis Watershed. April 1st being the opening day for fishing season saw no fishing fools out and about with rods in hand.



Thundering Waters:

It was frightening on the edge, standing two feet away from the pounding waters on the wing of the old mill in Abbot. The ground beneath my feet was literally vibrating from the force and physical impact of nature unleashed.



Kingsbury Stream Bridge:

The falls and rapids both sides of the Kingsbury Bridge were a thunderous froth of waves, holes and ledge drops. Being an occasional white water canoeist, I judged this maelstrom to be a Class V+ section of rapids.



Guilford, Blaine Avenue:

You could not access any of the towns along the river via the flooded river road, Route 15. You had to jig and jog the back roads to access towns from the north and south sides of the river. Wanting to get a closer look at downtown Guilford, I bush-whacked up through the woods, then down into town.



Guilford Library:

Looking up Main Street from Guilford Library had this eerie quality from the fog created by the extremes of the warm rain-storm and the cold snow-ice mix in the flood waters.



Evelyn's Bakery:

Evelyn's was defiantly not open for business. In fact the lower level was flooded almost halfway to the ceiling. People with businesses and dwellings on and along the rivers floodplain suffered great damage and loss; from Blanchard to Dover-Foxcroft and from Brownville to Milo.



Guilford Industries:

Main Street was running Class II+ whitewater by the textile mill. The flood loosened fuel tanks at the far end of the mill and tore them out, spreading a visible layer of oil on the houses and vegetation downstream from the mill complex.



Lowes Bridge:

This historic covered bridge was a unique, scenic attraction in central Maine. As the floodwaters continued to rise, they lifted Lowes Bridge off its foundation and in 20 seconds dumped it downriver. Later it showed up in downtown Dover-Foxcroft.



Covered Bridge Motel:

Looking downriver from the Lowes Bridge site, the motel and restaurant next to Route 15 were impossible to get to. Fortunately, no lives were lost in the Flood of 1987, but there were lots of pounding hearts witnessing this tumultuous event.



Dover-Foxcroft:

No one dared cross the upper bridge in downtown Dover-Foxcroft as the river had just risen up to the underside of the bridge. The fuel tanks and retaining wall of the gas station next to the bridge had collapsed into the relentless river. If that was not enough, Lowes Bridge was about to show up and there were growing concerns about its potential to damage the vulnerable downtown bridge.



Lowes Bridge in Dover-Foxcroft:

Looking upriver beyond Moosehead Manufacturing, an eerie shape emerged from the fog on the river. Indeed, Lowes Bridge was about to turn the big bend and come to an end. High waters pushing around the far end of the Moosehead complex created a massive eddy that pulled the bridge around the bend and onto the dam. As it broached the dam head, I could hear it breaking up; the sound was like a thousand bones breaking as the old timbers snapped and popped Lowes Bridge into oblivion.



Chamber of Commerce:

The Chamber of Commerce was not open for business or visitors alike and the Dexter Road was no longer passable at the peak of the flood.



Downtown Transportation:

Even in the face of adversity, Mainer's arise to the occasion with ingenuity and innovation. These three paddled into downtown Dover-Foxcroft and back out to the Dexter Road-Pine Street Jct. for a water level, local view of the Flood of 1987.



Peak Flow:

Sometime after Lowes Bridge had breached and broken up at the Moosehead Dam, the floodwaters reached their peak flow level of 37,300 cfs (cubic feet per second) on April 1, 1987. The high water was lapping the underside of the bridge just above the tidal wave of water flowing over Browns Mill Dam.



Browns Mill:

By mid-afternoon the peak flow was beginning to subside. It was still a force to be reckoned with in every community in the greater Piscataquis watershed that encompasses the Pleasant and Sebec Rivers, and the upper, middle and lower Piscataquis, all extending southwards from the headwaters in the Piscataquis Mountains and flowing south then east to its confluence with the Penobscot River in Howland.



Milo-Route 16:

Further east, Milo was impacted on three sides given that three rivers flow through the community. The Sebec River is in this scene. The Pleasant River skirts the east side of town and the Piscataquis flows east on the south side of town. All access was flooded except for Route 11 north to Brownville.

The Pleasant and Sebec Rivers added a huge volume to the Piscataquis, already at peak flow 37,300 cfs. The Sebec added another 11,000 cfs; the Pleasant River, sourcing at Whitecap - highest point in the Piscataquis Mountains - added another 27,600 cfs into the Piscataquis just south and east of Milo. All these rivers merging together form the lower Piscataquis. It was gauged at Medford with a peak flow of 85,000 cfs on April 1, 1987. All waters flow downhill by gravity and grade; that is a fundamental rule about peak and valley topography.



Brownville Jct. Bridge:

Within 24 hours of peak flow for the rivers in the watershed, flood levels began to subside leaving damage and debris in towns and along the low floodplains in the wake of the flood. The Brownville Jct. Bridge collected a huge bundle of trees and logs on the far side when the water levels rose and nearly took the bridge.



Clearing Skies:

By April 2 the Piscataquis River was still a force to be reckoned with. In the aftermath of it, the sun eventually broke through the clouds and that seemed to lift everyone's spirits a bit. Folks began to pitch in and clean out, helping one another in the aftermath of the meltdown and rain.



April 3, 1987:

The Flood of 1987 showed all of us how the forces of nature and weather can come together and create uncontrollable events that have significant impact on people, our communities and county. All the towns in Piscataquis County eventually pulled together, recovered and rebuilt from this tumultuous 100-year flood.

Driving today along the various roads that trace the rivers and streams that define the Piscataquis Watershed from Howland to Blanchard to KI/JoMary, it's hard to imagine that all hell broke loose on April 1, 1987 from all the snow that melted under heavy, warm rains that came to be the Flood of 1987. It was an April Fools joke on the start of fishing season, but it was a real hardship on people, their homes and businesses. A flood like this has a very tangible, observable life cycle, one you can see and witness as the water levels rise, peak and recede into history.

Footnote 2020 C19:

Today in 2020 we are confronted with yet another flood, Covid-19, a viral flood that has been loosened from the natural world that contained it, and is now flowing among all of us, through the air we breathe and the human contact we choose to make. Like a flood it's there, we tangibly know this, but unlike a flood we can't see it. Its presence and life is not observable until we perhaps begin to feel its symptoms if we should unfortunately happen to get infected by C-19.

I think the invisible nature of the C19 flood adds greatly to our vulnerability and fear, amplifying our sense of brooding anxiety about this terrible unknown, a viral flood potentially in our immediate atmosphere and personal spaces.

With floods like 1987 you can see and deal with them and hopefully get out of harm's way. But in a flood like C-19, you know it's present - can't be seen, and finding some human ways and means for living with the uncertainty of C-19, remains a significant question and task for each and all of us. What shall I do?

For me, I can already sense in some small, yet significant way, the huge unknown in C-19 is forcing me to face and think, question and act on the stuff-of-life-stuff, and helping others lives, informed by new questions I never imagined I would have to consider and embrace.

At the least, this is what I am coming to understand when I reflect on the community impacts of the Flood of 1987, and contrast that with my sense of the humanity and community impacts that are occurring now as a result of the Flood of C19-2020.

... RLM