

THE 1927 FLOOD PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

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<http://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/1927flood>

The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 inundated roughly 27,000 square miles of land and displaced some 700,000 persons. Property damage was estimated at \$400 million, and 246 people died in the flood waters. Particularly hard hit by the disaster was the Mississippi Delta region. The 124 photographs in this collection were taken by the flood committee of the Illinois Central Railroad Company in April, May, and October of 1927. Arranged geographically, north to south, the images document flood damage along the route of the Illinois Central Railroad from Memphis, Tennessee, to Delhi, Louisiana. The collection also includes one map of the Illinois Central Railroad throughout the flooded area.

Note: This activity can be done as a full class discussion or as individual student work. A fillable PDF student version is provided at <https://www.mdah.ms.gov/learning-lagniappes>.

Subjects that can be addressed within this Digital Archive:

- The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927
- Railroads and transportation
- Flood control and levee construction
- Race relations in early twentieth-century Mississippi
- Emergency planning
- The 1928 Flood Control Act

Curricular Connections

Below are key standards featured in this Learning Lagniappe.

Mississippi Studies

- MS.1.6: Assess the political, economic, and social effects of geographic processes (Great Flood of 1927, Hurricanes Camille, and Katrina) on technological and economic development in Mississippi.

Introduction to Geography

- ITG.11: Illustrate how human systems develop in response to physical environment conditions.

Advanced World Geography

- AWG.5.5: Assess the conditions which produce refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons and the processes countries utilize to meet their needs.
- AWG.7.4: Examine the role of technologies including communications, transportation, and infrastructure in the emergence of global economic interdependence.
- AWG.11.1: Explain how characteristics of the physical environment can both hinder and advance development.

Directions: Use items from the MDAH Digital Archive entitled 1927 Flood Photograph Collection found at <http://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/1927flood> and <https://mississippencyclopedia.org/entries/mississippi-river-flood-1927/> to lead your class in analyzing and interpreting the following items.

Note: Navigate to items by going to <http://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/1927flood>, clicking on the first picture, and then entering the desired item number in the box below the image.

Questions:

1. **Navigate to Item 8.** This is a photo of flood refugees standing in line at Birdsong Camp. Why are these refugees standing in line?

Answer: They are waiting to collect things they would have lost in the flood and which would be in short supply such as food, clothing, or medicine.

2. **Navigate to Item 21.** This is a photo of two males standing on the porch of houses surrounded by flood water. Some people chose not to evacuate and some were unable to evacuate the flood zone. What would you have to do to flood-proof your house and prepare your family to wait out the flood?

Answer: Put outdoor equipment such as cars, lawn furniture, and farm animals on the highest ground possible; roll up rugs and stack furniture and put in the attic; have food and water available for people and any pets/livestock and to ensure that you would be able to cook the food without running water or electricity; and build or buy a boat to keep at home and use for transportation.

3. **Navigate to Item 50.** This is a photo of flood water surrounding the depot at Egremont railroad station. Why would railroad tracks make a good place to escape flood waters? Who and what are using the tracks in this image?

Answer: Railroad tracks were places on elevated dirt embankments similar to levees. This higher ground made them natural places for small and large groups of refugees. In this image you see people, animals, cars, personal belongings, and boats. Very likely, there are people using the boxcars as shelters.

4. **Navigate to Item 61.** This May 2, 1927, photo of a flood area at a levee in Vicksburg shows the levee with two very different water levels on either side. What does this tell you about the status of flood waters two weeks after the levees broke?

Answer: It says that the Mississippi River (on the right) is still high and that it did rise higher than anyone thought it would because it breached the levee and flooded the town (left). Because the river is still so high, the town was unable to drain.

5. **Navigate to Item 67 and Item 74.** The first photo shows railroad tracks lined with sandbags and the second photo shows men filling sandbags. What is the purpose of the sandbags? Who put them there?

Answer: The purpose of the sandbags is to protect the railroad track from flooding in order to allow the evacuation of refugees and import of recovery supplies and personnel for as long as possible. Sandbags also helped slow the erosion of the levees by protecting them from the swiftly flowing water. Many of the sandbags alongside railroad tracks and levees were filled by African American workers who were residents of “relief camps” set up by the Red Cross. Most of the workers were poor sharecroppers and tenant farmers forced to reside in the camps because the flood destroyed their homes and crops.

6. **Navigate to Item 71 and Item 103.** These images show a camp for flood victims set up by the Red Cross, known as Tent City. What would be some of the challenges of living here?

Answer: Challenges of living here would have included overcrowding; lack of clean drinking/washing/bathing water; sanitation (no indoor, flushable toilets) and an excess of mud, debris, and animal carcasses that floated downstream; minimal medical supplies and personnel; and scarce food and clothing.

7. **Navigate to Item 104 and Item 105.** The first image shows cotton bales on rail cars and floating in flood waters. The second image shows a panoramic photograph of flooding in Yazoo City. How would the Great Flood have impacted Mississippi’s economy?

Answer: The flood destroyed farmland that was predominantly used to grow cotton. In addition, any harvested crops (such as the cotton in this image), merchandise in stores, or machinery that was in the flood zone was either washed away or damaged so it could no longer be used.